YALI Voices: Life experience motivated his fight against drugs [audio]

(Courtesy photo)

Unfortunate events led Ghana's Felix Lanyo, who also goes by the name Felix Goodman, to live at a drug rehabilitation center even though he hadn't used drugs. He has since been working to use his experiences of homelessness, interactions with addicts, and political stagnation to help the youth in his country.

In the most recent YALI Voices podcast, Lanyo discussed growing up with a father who was a drug addict and whose habit and constant absence forced him to drop out of school. When Lanyo's mother remarried, his stepfather refused to help pay for his schooling unless he followed him and became an electrician. Refusing to do so, he was ultimately not allowed to live with them.

Searching for a place to live, he heard about a drug rehabilitation center run by a Christian organization and they agreed to let him stay if he entered their program.

"After I went to the discipleship program and I lived with the addicts, I realized most of them got onto drugs not by their own will. It's certain truths, certain refrains, and, sometimes, curiosity," he said. The experience led him to launch an NGO that helps young people overcome their drug addictions.

"One thing I've realized is much of the youth gets hooked on drugs, sometimes, through curiosity and ignorance. And then once they have their first try, the second time the guys realize they cannot get out of it," he said. His organization helps explain the negative impacts of drug use and offers alternative methods to help people overcome their personal struggles.

Lanyo's experience of hunger has also led him to start an agriculture project to help provide food for people on the street. The difficulty he faced in getting an education has motivated him to help female child laborers get the schooling they need to improve their lives.

He also realized that many young Ghanaians are exercising their votes based on party allegiance or personality, rather than the policies and programs the politicians are advocating. Lanyo created the Ghana Youth Parliament House as a neutral space for people to meet, share ideas and present their solutions to the government.

In the podcast, which was recorded before Ghana's November 2016 general elections, he said: "My aim … is to bring every youth. It doesn't matter your political party you are coming from or whether you support — just come. Sit down. Let's solve our problem. What's our problems? Why are these things not going on right? Why is this thing like this?" So far, his initiative has spread to four regions in Ghana.

With all that he does, Lanyo said many are surprised to hear about his difficult background. "One thing I tell people is you don't put blames on people. You — you lead yourself. You learn to lead yourself first, before you can lead someone else. Because if you don't lead yourself, why — how can

you really lead another person?”

Listen to the full podcast to learn more about Lanyo’s extraordinary experiences.

Don’t have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

“YALI Voices Podcast:
Felix Lanyo (AKA Goodman)”
Transcript

[SINGING] Yes, we can. Sure, we can change the world.

MR. MACON PHILLIPS: Greetings, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast — your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. I’m Macon Phillips and I’m so glad you’ve joined us today. Before we get started, don’t forget to subscribe to the podcast on iTunes and Google Play. And visit yali.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. If you like what we’re doing here, please, take a moment to recommend us to a friend.

My conversation today is with Felix Goodman. Felix is a rising young leader and the founder of the Ghana Youth Parliament House, an organization dedicated to providing detailed information on candidates seeking public office. Felix also works in helping others combat their addictions to drugs, hoping to steer them on a successful, drug-free path. Now, without further ado, here is my conversation with Felix Goodman.

Felix, thanks for joining us today.

MR. FELIX GOODMAN: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: And when you run into people and they say, “What do you do,” how do you answer that question?

MR. GOODMAN: What do I do? Basically, I’ll tell them how much I’ve been a blessing unto myself, how much I’ve coached myself, and then how much I’m helping and impacting hope and life into other people.

MR. PHILLIPS: Great. And so what does that mean on a day-to-day basis? What are some of the things that you’re working on these days?

MR. GOODMAN: I’ve taken the YALI course. It’s been a great thing. And it’s built my leadership skills. And I run an NGO, actually. And many of the activities I do is with the anti-drug campaign. One thing I’ve realized is much of the youth gets hooked on drugs, sometimes, through curiosity and ignorance. And then once they have their first try, the second time the guys realize they cannot get out of it. And then they just build up like that.

So I’ve taken it upon myself that I’ll make — I’ll create awareness of drugs, so young folks and high school — especially like per se — should get a fair idea of what drugs is, and the kind of impact it

brings us onto their lives, and the effects of how much it will drain them down. Some — I speak to some and they go, because I have break ups from some relationships, I have some family problems, and so I have just taken some drugs to feel OK.

Some say, because I'm depressed, I'm taking drugs to feel OK. But I ask them, are you going to be depressed forever? Won't the problem come back after you've taken the drugs? I said, after you're off, the problem is still there. So I'm trying to tell them that it's not the right way to get off your problems, but then there's another alternative which is better than that.

Because if you — for me, the main reason why I'm running this anti-drug program is my father was on drugs. Yeah. And he was never responsible. Yeah. So it has affected me in the long run because I fell out of high school. I couldn't complete high school because my father wasn't there for me. He left me when I had been 180 days. That was six months. He was never there for me again until I'm sitting here right now. And then he died of HIV and AIDS. So I know how it has to be on drugs. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so you — he wasn't around growing up?

MR. GOODMAN: No, he wasn't at all.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that affected you a lot. You dropped out of high school.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did you correct it? What was the — what was the turning point for you, where you sort of realized, for yourself, that you wanted to take it a different direction?

MR. GOODMAN: And then when I — sorry. When I dropped out of high school, I was actually a good student. I was actually a very bright student in school. And then I can probably say I was the best student in the class. I went in the school, after my registration, I never paid any fees anymore. Even though I wasn't on scholarship, the head teacher allowed me to be in school — through from Form I through to Form II, second term. He encouraged me to come to school.

But my bills were accumulating. It became too much that I fell out of school. When I came home, I saw it. I told myself, so does that mean it's end of me going back to school? Because I just realized I was best among my colleagues in class. So would I end up somewhere else that they would even become a better person than I would be tomorrow? No, no. That's not me. I don't want to be that. I need to go back to school.

So I started pulling things together. I was trying and making some little gardening farms to get us some monies and go back to school. Some worked out, some — actually, it didn't go. I didn't get the funds to go back. I was trying scholarship opportunities. And my mom — my mom actually married to a different man, who was an electrician and he was into poetry, actually. So he never supported my idea of going to school.

He said I should become an electrician as he was. I haven't said an electrician is a bad job — it's a good job. But that wasn't what I wanted to do. I actually wanted to be in the classroom, go to school, and become someone. So he said, if I can't follow him up, then that's it. He can't pay my school fees. He can't take care of me.

And besides, I can't eat from the house because it's that electrician job that brings the money to the house. If I'm not following him, then I'm going to look for scholarships, and stuff, and have venues to go back to school, to the classroom. Then he was sorry. I thought he was.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you had a choice between either studying what he wanted you to study and having your education covered, or studying what you wanted to study and having to go figure it out on your own?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Sure. So I took the — I took the challenge upon myself that, you know, for me, I would go to school. Whatever it means I pass to go to school, I'll go to school.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK.

MR. GOODMAN: So I was trying reaching some radio stations and putting my profile that people could help me get back to school. But, unfortunately, it never happened. Nobody was able to help me. And I've always been struggling to go back to school. And I can say, right now, I just started, on Monday, to Ghana Institute of Languages in French and Spanish. Yeah. And it's great. And I'm taking it from there.

And through all this time — that was around 2005 until now that I have always been dreaming to go back to the classroom. And that's encouraged me. I've done so many things. Because when I actually left home, my stepfather had a different apartment somewhere. And they were supposed to move. Because where we residing, at first, the rent died. So we were supposed to move. And he said, he can't — he actually told my mom to tell me that I'm not welcome in his new apartment.

So I — and I thought he was kidding, but — and my mom kept on repeating the same thing to him, you know, he says, yeah, he says this and that. OK. So two days until the day they move, I heard on the radio, once I was — I like — I love listening to a radio a lot. So I heard on the radio there was this rehab center. I didn't even hear it from the advert it was a rehab center. They were saying — talking about a discipleship program.

That they teach about the word of God and you become — and you continue to preach the word of God and teach other people. Of course, you get to a point. I was frustrated. I didn't know what to do. So I was like, OK, I — because I wasn't so strong in reading the Bible. I don't know if I was even believing it. And I — I don't know. I was disturbed. So I wanted to do something. I was like, OK, why don't I go? Since I claim I'm a Christian, why I don't go, and study the bible, and then become a pastor or something?

That is even better than something. So I went. I think four days to they are moving, I went to check. And when I got there, I realized it was a rehab center/discipleship program. So I spoke to my mother. You know, seriously, I want to join. Because it was un-intensive.

So if there was something, you could home and come back. And I told my dad — my step dad told me I would have to move from the house. So I thought that would be an opportunity for me to even get a place to stay or to live. The main apostle said, OK, I'm welcome, if I can join the program. I said, OK.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that's what got you focused on the anti-drug area?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. That got for me. Because when my dad was on drugs, I didn't spend time

with him. I actually saw my dad twice my whole life. And, you know, I didn't know how much the effect was until I went to the rehab. And so that's why I went, too, because I kind of had this bitterness in me against him. Like, yeah, he didn't take care of me. And I had that in me.
But after I went to the discipleship program and I lived with the addicts, I realized most of them got onto drugs not by their own will. It's certain truths, certain refrains, and, sometimes, curiosity. And the thing can just happen. And it just gets you. So I understood him and I was able to let go. And I forgive him. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so it's been personally rewarding, in that sense?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Sure. There was this guy in the program who actually also had a problem with his father. And I could — I felt that, no, this guy, you know, he doesn't even want to hear his daddy's name. So I called him to the side. And I never — I hadn't told him my story. So I called him to the side. You know, you haven't heard my story. You have to forgive people. I mean, you become free. And I told him my story. And from there, he was able to forgive him. And he became free and he's my friend now.
MR. PHILLIPS: Wow.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. So from — from that, it's been great. So I went to Chosen, I think — no, a day before I go to Chosen, I actually got a job. And that was a cleaning job at Commonwealth Hall. It's the west of the Ghana campus. So I went for the first day. And I booked in Chosen rehab that I would be coming. That was four days until my stepfather's moving. I will be coming. So the apostle allowed it. So I said, OK, I should come.

But I — and then, within that time — I applied to the job earlier, before I even went to Chosen, but they never called. But the moment I went to make enquiries that day at Chosen, they had called me to come to the job. So I went. And then the job, I started. I did the first day, the second day. I realized, no, I have to go to Chosen. So I went for the rehab and I went for the discipleship program. And I went through the program.

So when I came home, I realized that, you know, our community — a lot of young people, you know, in our communities, mainly, they start using their drugs through high schools. They go to school and people are trying it. Some — some will take — like a friend takes it. And he's so smart. He's so brilliant. He can study hard. And all these things, it's not true. It's false. They're all lies. It doesn't happen.

And so you see a friend, he's so calm. And you say, OK, because I always want to become — I want to be like my friend. And you get to know that your friend is on drugs. And he will tell you, OK, come on, give it a first try. Just one try. That's all. And it's not only one try. And it's going to be continuous. It's going to be forever. And it becomes part of you. So that's it. And I– actually, I am the President and the CEO of Ghana Youth Parliament House.

This is because I realized the youth in Ghana, they– there's a problem with the youth because some of them will go to vote for a president or a candidate because they say he's so fine. He's a tall man, so I voted for him. Because my family, they always voted for this particular party, so I'm going to vote for that. And I realized, no, it's not supposed to be so like– before you vote for someone, you should even assess the person.

Like where he is coming from? What has he done? What contributions has he done? I mean, before you even want to become the president or get the position, you should– they should ask certain questions. You know, the youth of Ghana, we have to– we have to learn and question authorities. Like, why is this thing done like this? Why is this, too? OK. Why shouldn't it be done this way? Why can't it be done this way instead of always going through one root end?

And so I got an idea. I brought some people together– young folks together. They bought into the idea of like, oh, this is a great thing. And so I went to Parliament House. I met them and I spoke to them. And this is my idea. I think it's great. I think it's a good thing if we, the youth, can come up with our own parliament where you can come together and discuss issues concerning we. I mean, it's– they can– because, probably, they wouldn't even know what our problem is.

Because they are the highest, at the apex, they wouldn't know what is actually happening down there. So they need to hear from it as well. OK.

MR. PHILLIPS: So is the Youth Parliament– does it draw from young people around the country?

MR. GOODMAN: So what we are doing now is– they advised me– they gave me a letter to register it as a company, as an entity, so that we could– because, right now, the government doesn't have funds for that. So if we want to take on a program, we can search for funds to support. So because it's something that is going to be for the whole youth in Ghana, they thought it wise we should have it in every region. So we have 10 regions in Ghana.

So when, actually, I started there with the Accra one. And there's one on the Upper West, and there's one in the Ashanti region, and then the Central region. So we have four regions now that it's running in. Yeah. So that's really, very effective. So yeah. And aside that, I mean, it's agriculture. Because when I was with my stepdad, he– aside this electrician thing, he loved agriculture. And I farmed a lot. And I realized some of the benefits of, you know, farming.

And I've slept so much with hunger when I came out of– Yeah. So I know how it feels to be hungry. So I started this agriculture project. I just started it. Our youth and, let's say, 50% of charity give for people. I mean, to create food security for people. Because there are a lot of people on the street. And they go to– they go to bed on empty stomachs. And it can make someone to go and steal. Because someone is hungry, he's not able to even think straight.

So if we could come together, and actually do something, and invest into agriculture, it would even decrease unemployment in Ghana. Because the unemployment rate in Ghana is bad. The youth unemployment is very high. So if I can even convince people– if I start and the youth see that this is flourishing, people will, actually, buy into the idea.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great.

MR. GOODMAN: Man, it's going to help.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. So you're doing work in the anti-drug area.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: You're doing work with the Ghana Youth Parliament.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: What does the future hold for you? What do you– what do you want to do with those things, moving forward? Or are there other issues, too, that you're starting to pay more attention to? And then, I guess, how does this all fit into the election that's coming up in November? Do you think that's going to be something that really increases the energy, in terms of people's interest in these issues?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Yeah. Sure. You know, I've– we were supposed to have a meeting, like a general meeting. I mean, let's say a regional meeting. And that was in the coming August. But the elections is coming on and there was this public relations officer in Ghana– the Parliament House. He called me. And he told me, no, he doesn't want to see– they don't want a situation whereby political parties will be taken advantage of this.

Because it's not a party affiliated organization, or something, or a platform whereby we say we belong to one particular party and they will have support– we will be supporting them. No, it's not that. We– we are neutral. Everybody comes, shares ideas, problems, and we find a way to get it solved. So we find a way to voice this out to the main authorities, so that we can get this solved.
And so he actually told me to put a halt on it. And so we canceled the meeting, which would be coming up, because the elections will be coming in November. And then Zita Okaikoi, which, actually, is in my constituency– she actually came for one of our meetings. And she was like, oh, yeah, that's good. So can she be coming more. And I could realize the– this thing– how they want to put it as in political And that is just not my dream for me this whole thing.

And that is not my aim. It is to bring every youth– it doesn't matter your political party you are coming from or whether you support– just come. Sit down. Let's solve our problem. What's our problems? Why are these things not going on right? Why is this thing like this? Yeah. It shouldn't be. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. OK. So we're trying to wrap up each of these interviews with the same three questions, so I wanted to shoot them at you. And let's what you have to say. The first is, tell us something about you that surprises people.

MR. GOODMAN: One thing about me that surprises people is when I tell people where, exactly, I come from– my background. And people are like, wow. People don't believe me. Yeah. People would think, because I became homeless.
No, that– that isn't me and that wasn't me. I don't know. There's this– and one thing I tell people is you don't put blames on people. You– you lead yourself. You learn to lead yourself first, before you can lead someone else. Because if you don't lead yourself, why– how can you really lead another person?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's right.

MR. GOODMAN: So you have to be strong in your mind and be your own leader first.

MR. PHILLIPS: So my second question is, do you consider yourself more of a morning person, early riser? Or are you a late night person?

MR. GOODMAN: I sleep late at night. I sleep very late. I'm a–

MR. PHILLIPS: You stay up late at night and sleep very late into the morning?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. My nights– normally, if I go to bed early, it's, let's say, around 1:00 AM. Yeah. That's early. Sometimes 2:00 AM, 3:00 AM, 4:00.

MR. PHILLIPS: And are there things you do every day or every week that you feel like are routines that help you be more organized and be more effective, in terms of achieving your goals? Are there tips or advice you would give to people?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Sure. I actually– I speak to young folks, young people enough, especially in my community, where I live. I've led so many people. I have four girls– four, strong girls now– that I'm helping out. Yeah. And some were actually under child labor, which I've comforted them. I spoke to them. I'm like, why are you working for? I mean, they are very young. Some are very young. They are working and telling their stories.
And I said, I know it's not supposed to be so. And they said I've been harassed, sexually, and stuff. No, no. That's not– so they should pursue education. So I got them, I coached them. Yeah. I take them through. There's this one young lady who has been harassed sexually. Even though she's in child labor, I spoke to her. Because I don't have the money to, you know, carry her out and say, OK, I'm establishing you here, I told her, OK, you have to play your cards well.

I opened a bank account for her, so when she gets her money– she used to send the money back to the family– like the mother and the senior brothers are draining the money from her. And I thought, you know, you have to go school. Education is important. You have to get educated because that's one thing I realized– that if our women, you know, get educated, if they get enlightened, I don't– I think they– I will say it would change. Yeah.

Because there are so many kids lurching around. I mean, too much. Some are father-less. And look, all these problems will reduce if you're enlightened, if you go to school, if you're educated, if you know your rights. I mean, you can even– like question. Actually, a man– when a man comes into our life, you know what you're about. Yeah. And it will solve our problems. So if our women are tutored well, they are taught, if they are well educated, if they go to school, and they know they're rights–

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MR. GOODMAN: It will have impact on us because it's on them.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. So my last question– and this is really because we've been asking you so many questions– if you could ask a question to President Obama, what would your question be?

MR. GOODMAN: My question to President Obama would be, what would the future of YALI be when he leaves office? Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's a good question. And, you know, we've talked about that some. And I think the future of YALI lies, in large part, with people like you, who are going to take initiative and make YALI something that works for them, in their own country. We'll continue to have these fellowship programs, we'll continue to have these leadership centers, but I think the real exciting part about YALI– the next thing– is going to be what young leaders come up with themselves that we

can support.
And the other really exciting part is what President Obama's going to do after he's President because you know he's still going to be involved, somehow, in Young Leaders in Africa because it's just an inspiring– an inspiring time. So Felix, thank you so much for joining us today. Thanks, everyone at the YALI network, for tuning in. We'll have more interviews coming up soon.
All right. I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Felix. His story about how he took his father's addiction to drugs and turned it around into making sure others didn't follow that same path is remarkable. Thank you, Felix, for sharing your story with us. And thank you, everyone, for tuning in. If you want to connect with Felix Goodman, you can find him on Facebook. Spell his name F-E-L-I-X G-O-O-D-M-A-N. Felix Goodman.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and as part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government. Thanks, everyone.

« YALI Voices » : pour ce fellow du Bénin, le développement des jeunes est un antidote à la violence [audio]

Il est important de s'engager pour une cause. C'est ce que pense Michel Okan. Et selon lui, plus on le fait tôt, plus on en comprend la valeur. Sa cause à lui, ce sont ses activités avec les jeunes dans le cadre de son travail : il s'efforce de leur donner accès à l'éducation, à des ressources et à des projets axés sur la stabilité de la société et la réduction du risque de leur implication dans des actes violents.

Une bonne cause peut solliciter de notre part un engagement à vie. « C'est comme si on ne peut que faire que ça. Je peux dire que c'est ce que je suis en train de faire, ce que je suis en train de devenir », explique-t-il à Caroline Groussain, du département d'État, dans un podcast « YALI Voices » en français.

Michel Okan s'exprime lors du Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit de 2016. (Twitter)

Michel Okan, qui est béninois, a participé à la Mandela Washington Fellowship en 2015. Le

programme permet d'améliorer les compétences en leadership déjà acquises ou d'en fournir à ceux qui en ont besoin. Mais il « n'est pas une fin en soi », estime-t-il. Il est important de se remettre en question pour s'améliorer continuellement et pour prendre davantage de responsabilités.

Pour lui, dans la pratique, cela signifie « travailler avec les jeunes de façon à ce qu'ils aient un état d'esprit d'indépendance, d'indépendance de penser, de faire et d'agir, mais pour la bonne cause ».

En septembre 2016, Michel Okan est intervenu au Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit*, le sommet mondial sur les opportunités économiques pour les jeunes. Il y a discuté de la situation des jeunes qui vivent dans des zones de conflit et de l'importance d'anticiper les facteurs qui les mènent à l'extrémisme violent.

« La violence n'est que le résultat des frustrations, ce n'est que le résultat de ce qui est mal fait quelque part, par certains, par quelqu'un », souligne-t-il dans le podcast.

Même si les gens ne savent pas comment la violence commence, il est possible de savoir comment l'éviter, affirme-t-il. Pour cela, il faut travailler avec les outils déjà disponibles, tels la constitution et le processus démocratique.

« Ce n'est pas une responsabilité uniquement des hommes publics ; c'est une responsabilité de tout le monde, et ça part de l'éducation », insiste-t-il.

Pour en savoir plus sur Michel Okan, écoutez le podcast complet, en français.

Si vous n'avez pas accès à SoundCloud, iTunes ou Google Play, retrouvez la transcription du podcast ci-dessous :

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

"YALI Voices Podcast:
Michel Okan"

Transcript

Bienvenue à vous, chers jeunes leaders africains ! Vous écoutez le podcast YALI Voices, les voix de YALI. Ici, on partage avec vous certains des meilleurs témoignages de l'Initiative pour les jeunes leaders africains. Je m'appelle Caroline Groussain et je suis contente que vous soyez à l'écoute aujourd'hui. Avant de commencer, n'oubliez pas de vous abonner aux podcasts sur iTunes et Google Play, et rendez-vous sur yali.state.gov pour vous tenir au courant de l'actualité de YALI.

Aujourd'hui j'ai discuté avec Michel Okan. Michel est un ancien participant au programme Mandela Washington Fellowship. Il a 36 ans, il est diplômé d'économie et il est né et a grandi au Bénin. Mais c'est ailleurs, et sur une toute autre voie, que la vie l'a mené. Michel vit aujourd'hui au Mali, où il travaille pour la paix. Plus qu'un travail, la paix est devenue sa vie. Et c'est vraiment ce qui se dégage de lui quand on lui parle. La paix, le calme, l'humilité, mais aussi un esprit on ne peut plus déterminé. Comment les jeunes peuvent-ils apporter des solutions pacifiques aux problèmes rencontrés dans la société ? C'est une des questions sur lesquelles il travaille.

Mais revenons à l'interview de Michel…

CG : Michel, on est bien contents de vous recevoir ici aujourd'hui.
MO : Merci beaucoup.

CG : Donc vous êtes arrivé hier soir à Washington. Vous êtes ce matin ici avec nous pour ce podcast. Vous allez ensuite enchaîner avec le Sommet mondial sur les opportunités économiques pour les jeunes, le Global Youth Economic Opportunity Summit. Vous avez un emploi du temps de ministre ! C'est quoi ce sommet ?
MO : Ce sommet parle des opportunités économiques des jeunes à travers le monde et les griefs qu'ils ont, et quel apport de solutions, qu'est-ce qu'on connaît des jeunes, qu'est-ce qu'on ne connaît pas d'eux, et comment apporter ces solutions à certains de leurs problèmes pour la paix et le développement durable.

CG : C'est quelque chose sur lequel vous travaillez ?
MO : Oui, c'est quelque chose sur laquelle je travaille tous les jours. Je travaille au sein des Nations unies comme chargé de programme qui s'occupe des projets à impact rapide. Et c'est des petits projets qui sont mis en œuvre au profit des populations les plus affectées par le conflit. Moi, en tant que jeune ayant la chance de gérer ce programme au Mali pour les Nations unies, particulièrement dans le nord, je me vois dans la responsabilité de faire plus attention à la jeunesse en matière de paix et de développement.

CG : Comment vous êtes-vous retrouvé à faire ce que vous faites aujourd'hui ?
MO : Je n'avais pas imaginé dans mes activités en tant que travailleur pour les communautés impacter directement les communautés parce que je suis plus intéressé par les activités qui impactent directement les communautés, la population…

CG : En fait, vous avez fait des études d'économie, c'est ça ?
MO : Oui, oui. Donc je suis plus intéressé par ce genre de projets. C'est à dire, je vois les choses réalisées de la sorte que la population est bénéficiaire directement sur ça que des impacts indirects, c'est à dire que ça ne part pas d'une administration publique d'abord — je suis plus intéressé que la population soit bénéficiaire direct que ça. Mais je n'ai jamais imaginé que j'allais me trouver dans un contexte où je vais gérer les projets pour la paix. Je n'ai pas imaginé. Même si je me suis dit une fois dans ma tête si ça arrivait, je vais pouvoir réussir mais je suis en train de le faire maintenant. Je crois que beaucoup de jeunes aussi veulent le faire.

CG : Mais votre expérience passée vous aide certainement aujourd'hui, n'est-ce pas ?
MO : Oui. Oui. Parce qu'avant d'aller même faire ça, j'ai travaillé sur les projets d'élection, pour une élection au Bénin. Je vois comment les élections, comment c'est important pour la paix parce que la prévention des conflits passe aussi par l'élection. Je prends le cas de mon pays en 2011, peu s'en fallait, à cause de l'outil qui allait servir pour une bonne élection pour une bonne élection, peu s'en fallait. Aujourd'hui tout le monde est fier d'être Béninois parce qu'au moins c'est une démocratie et la population a accepté les résultats. C'est une fierté.

CG : En parlant d'élections, justement, comment est-ce qu'on peut empêcher la violence liée aux élections ? Qu'est-ce que vous conseillez aux gens qui n'acceptent pas les résultats du scrutin ?
MO : C'est de tout faire pour qu'on y n'arrive pas, comment faire pour ne pas arriver là. C'est ça qui

est plus important. Parce que la violence n'est que le résultat des frustrations, ce n'est que le résultat de ce qui est mal fait quelque part, par certains, par quelqu'un. Ce que je vois c'est, comment faire pour ne pas arriver là ? Parce que, quand ça commence… On ne sait pas en réalité comment ça… J'observe que les gens ne savent réellement pas comment ça commence. Mais on sait comment faire pour ne pas arriver là. Mais pourquoi ne pas utiliser ce qu'on sait ? Et c'est ce qu'on ne sait pas ce à quoi on veut toujours s'attaquer. Et ce qu'on sait, on parle des institutions, dans certains pays, constitution, la démocratie… tout ce qu'on sait autour de ça. On sait tout ça, là. C'est de faire ce qu'on sait pour que — pour qu'on n'y aille pas, au lieu de s'attaquer à ce qu'on ne sait pas. Tout le monde connaît la paix. Mais on ne veut pas utiliser la paix. On veut aller à la violence. C'est un état d'esprit et cet état d'esprit doit être manifesté dans tout ce qu'on fait, à tous les niveaux. Ce n'est pas une responsabilité uniquement des hommes publics , c'est une responsabilité de tout le monde, et ça part de l'éducation. Le contexte dans lequel tout homme dès qu'il est né, je parle d'homme grand ''H'', le tout contexte dans lequel on lui transmet certains acquis culturels qui perdurent, qui déterminent sa vie, du début de sa vie jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, il faudrait intégrer des éléments qui le préparent, ce qui lui fait accepter la paix, qui le fait manifester la paix…

CG : Une éducation dès l'enfance…
MO : Oui, l'éducation, de façon globale.

CG : Puisqu'on parle d'éducation, qu'est-ce que vous avez appris au sein du programme Mandela Washington Fellowship. Quel impact le programme a eu sur vous ?
MO : Le programme a renforcé ce que je suis en tant que jeune. C'est comme si je me retrouve à avoir pris un engagement au vu et au su de tout le monde, devant des grands regards. Un engagement pour aller jusqu'au bout d'impacter positivement le monde. Et je dois tout faire pour le réussir. C'est comme si j'ai pris le chemin de non-retour pour impacter positivement.

CG : OK. Grande responsabilité !
MO : Grande responsabilité. Donc c'est comme tu portes une étiquette et tu dois tout faire pour la mériter, pour la conserver. Parce qu'on te cite comme exemple pour d'autres. Donc tu n'as plus le droit, tu n'as plus intérêt à faire chemin — demi-tour par un manque peut-être en faisant face à des difficultés au quoi… .

CG : Et le YALI Network, est-ce que vous pourriez nous donner un exemple d'activités auxquelles vous participez ?
MO : Je participe vraiment à des activités d'échange avec les jeunes, partage d'information, formation. La preuve est faite, quand j'ai parlé aux jeunes, je leur ai parlé de l'opportunité de YALI. La limite partagée par tous les jeunes, c'est l'anglais. Moi je leur ai dit, moi je suis né au Bénin, j'ai grandi au Bénin. Je parle l'anglais moyennement qui me permet de me faire comprendre, de comprendre les gens quand ils parlent. Je n'ai pas été dans un pays anglophone étudier l'anglais. Je leur ai dit – beaucoup d'entre eux ont actuellement là 18 ans, 20 ans. C'est 35 ans la limite de YALI. Il faudrait qu'ils saisissent cette opportunité, en pensant que le YALI va continuer, tout autre programme comme fulbright va continuer. Donc de saisir cette opportunité de renforcer leur anglais à partir de maintenant en disant d'ici deux ans, trois ans, je serai bon en anglais pour pouvoir saisir les opportunités. Et là, ça a généré un programme de formation en anglais que je donne aux jeunes avec un collègue qui s'appelle Daniel Massamba. On forme les jeunes de Gao en anglais jusqu'à aujourd'hui. On forme les jeunes.

CG : Ça vous paraît important de s'engager pour une cause ?
MO : C'est très important de s'engager. Si on s'engage un peu plus tôt, on connaît plus la valeur. Non seulement on connaît l'importance, mais aussi ça devient la vie qu'on vit. Et ça n'a plus de différence, c'est comme si on ne peut que faire que ça. Je peux dire que c'est ce que je suis en train de faire, ce que je suis en train de devenir.

CG : Quel message aimeriez-vous faire passer aux jeunes du YALI Network qui ont envie de faire bouger les choses ?
MO : Bon, je vais parler comme tout le monde, je vais leur donner du courage. Mais, je vais aussi dire, être YALI, avoir participé au programme YALI n'est pas une fin en soi. Parce que moi je comprends, c'est un programme soit qui t'améliore par rapport aux qualités de leadership que tu as, ou bien qui te donne des qualités de leadership que tu n'as pas. N'importe lequel des cas, quand tu as participé à YALI, ça ne veut pas dire que tu ne vas jamais te remettre en cause sur certaines qualités que tu n'as pas encore qui te permettent d'avoir un bon emploi ou bien qui te permettent d'avoir ce que tu veux. Ça ne veut pas dire que les gens n'ont pas…, je ne suis pas en train de dire que les gens n'ont pas ces qualités ou bien qu'ils ne font pas de leur mieux. Mais il ne faut pas se dire qu'on a déjà assez fait, qu'on ne doit pas s'améliorer. Il ne faut pas aussi se dire, bon parce que je porte l'étiquette YALI, c'est déjà suffisant pour que les gens me considèrent à tel poste ou bien à telle responsabilité.
CG : C'est à dire ? Aller sur internet… ?
MO : Oui, aller sur internet, aussi, c'est un état d'ouverture d'esprit qu'il faut plus accepter. Je parle, parce que, ce n'est pas tous les jeunes de Gao, c'est vrai. Je vais citer un exemple : l'année passée, une de mes activités qui consistait à rassembler les jeunes et à leur parler, et à renforcer leur leadership et consort, j'ai choisi un thème au moment de la période des candidatures de YALI pour les motiver à postuler au programme YALI et au même moment préparer leur esprit à être ouvert pour d'autres opportunités car ce n'est pas YALI seul qui va leur permettre d'être un leader dans leur communauté. Donc j'ai partagé mon expérience avec eux, avec des collègues. Ça ne m'a pas choqué, la réponse d'un jeune, un des jeunes leaders, qui disait oui, tout ce que j'ai dit, que c'est vrai, la jeunesse de Gao, ils n'ont pas besoin de ça, ils n'ont qu'à vivre leur vie ici et… pour dire de façon ramassée, lui, il n'est pas pour. Il y a plein de ces gens comme ça qui influencent les jeunes comme ça, pas uniquement à Gao, mais c'est partout. Et si je vais faire une autre recommandation, c'est de travailler avec les jeunes de façon à ce qu'ils aient un état d'esprit d'indépendance, d'indépendance de penser, de faire et d'agir, mais pour la bonne cause, pour la bonne cause. Heureusement après, beaucoup de jeunes sont venus vers moi, même certains sages qui ont participé à l'activité. Ils m'ont encouragé, ils m'ont dit de ne pas faire vraiment attention à ce que le jeune là, il vient de dire, qu'il ne comprend pas encore et il aura le temps de comprendre. Et ce qui a confirmé effectivement que les jeunes ont compris, une semaine après cet atelier de motivation en leadership, YALI et consort, mon téléphone sonne – il dit : « Oui, Monsieur Michel, on voudrait te voir, on voudrait que tu participes à une réunion le dimanche prochain ». Je dis : « Quelle réunion ? » Ils disent ils ont créé un club qu'ils ont appelé YALI à Gao. Donc c'est comme ça, le club est lancé et le club fonctionne jusqu'à présent.

CG : Garder un esprit ouvert et une indépendance de pensée et d'action, on va s'arrêter sur cette note positive. Merci beaucoup Michel d'avoir pris le temps de répondre à nos questions. Et on vous souhaite une très bonne semaine aux États-Unis.
MO : Je ne vais pas finir cet entretien sans remercier tous les gestionnaires de programme, YALI, le

gouvernement américain, tous les autres jeunes, toute cette organisation qui m'a permis d'être ici, vous aussi, tous ceux qui contribuent de près et de loin au programme de YALI, tous les autres jeunes, je salue tout le monde. Je vais tenir mon engagement, je tiens mon engagement.

CG : Bonne journée à tous.

J'ai passé un très bon moment en compagnie de Michel. C'est vraiment une personne qui a beaucoup de qualités, qui comprend le sens du service public et qui sait saisir les opportunités de networking offertes par YALI.

Encore merci à Michel d'avoir passé un moment avec nous pour partager son expérience. Revenez sur YALI Voices. Écoutez nos podcasts avec des jeunes leaders africains et laissez-vous inspirer par leurs expériences.

La musique de notre générique "E – Go Happen," est composée par Grace Jerry et produite par Presidential Precinct. Les podcasts YALI Voices sont produits par le département d'État des États-Unis dans le cadre de l'initiative YALI pour les jeunes leaders africains financée par le gouvernement des États-Unis. Merci à tous.

YALI Voices: You're not born with self-confidence. You build it, says Ugandan entrepreneur. [audio]

(Courtesy of Jamila Mayanja)

Jamila Mayanja started her working life by boldly approaching a prospective employer and telling him she could do anything his company required. "Teach me and I will learn it in 30 minutes," she said.

It was an unusual move for a woman in Uganda, where "the survival mode is be beautiful, get ready for marriage, stay in marriage, be respectful," she told the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast.

The 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow went on to found Smart Girls Uganda, where she empowers young girls and women through training to build their self-esteem.

Many have the impression that self-confidence is something you are born with. "No, you can actually build it," she told Phillips. Her passion has been to encourage girls to pursue their dreams and create their own initiatives.

Mayanja shared a funny story about how her aversion to doing laundry led her to start a franchise company through Smart Girls Uganda called J Mobile Laundry Services that is helping to address

women's unemployment in Kampala. With the help of the YALI Network, she plans to open the country's first laundromat, consulting with other Mandela Washington Fellows to make it environmentally friendly as well as incorporate it into her training center, where women are planning their own businesses.

"Everything is quite YALI-branded," she said.

Learn more about Mayanja and her remarkable achievements, including the Haven Anti-AIDS Foundation she co-founded to empower youth in the fight against HIV/AIDS, illiteracy and poverty.

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

"YALI Voices Podcast: Jamila Mayanja"

[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can. Sure we can. ♪
♪ Change the world. ♪

[MUSIC CONTINUES]

MACON PHILLIPS: Greetings, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices Podcast, your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. I'm Macon Phillips and I'm happy to have you here with me today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast on iTunes and Google Play. And visit YALI.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. And if you like what we're doing here, take a moment to recommend this all to your friends.

Today, I'm joined by Jamila Mayanja. Jamila is the CEO of Smart Girls Uganda, a company that not only trains women and girls in entrepreneurship, but also in life skills, to empower them and build their self-esteem. In addition to that, Jamila created a franchise company, founded an organization that sensitized youth about AIDS, and organized Uganda's first father-daughter dance to showcase the importance of fathers in their daughters' lives. Now, my conversation with Jamila Mayanja.

So hello everybody. This is Macon Phillips. I'm here in Washington, DC, with Jamila Mayanja, who is a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow, but has come back to the United States for an entrepreneurship conference that we'll hear a little bit more about. Really excited to have you here in our offices here at the State Department. Welcome. It's good to have you, Jamila.

JAMILA MAYANJA: It's good to be here. I'm so excited to meet the YALI Network people behind the scenes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes — see the actual sausage being made, as it were.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah. It's so cool.

MR. PHILLIPS: And we are really excited to have you here because there is oftentimes this distance,

geographical and —

MS. MAYANJA: Huge distance

MR. PHILLIPS: — and otherwise, yeah, that we want to have this relationship with young leaders across Africa and we've developed a program that has this exchange program that brought you here, that has the Regional Leadership Centers in Africa in a number of different locations — Dakar, Accra, Nairobi, Johannesburg. And we also have this virtual network, the YALI Network. And each of these areas has been really exciting, but it's sometimes difficult to really keep that connection when a key part of the relationship is so far away.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah. That's so true.

MR. PHILLIPS: So it's nice to have you here in person.

MS. MAYANJA: I'm so happy to be here.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. How long have you been in the States this time?

MS. MAYANJA: Just a week.

MR. PHILLIPS: This is your — is this your second time? Was the Mandela Washington Fellowship your first time in the United States?

MS. MAYANJA: Yes, actually, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So this is one of the things that I'm always curious about, which is as someone who had never been to the United States before but probably paid attention to it and was interested in it, what was the biggest surprise to you, you know, getting off the plane at the airport and kind of spending the first few days here?

MS. MAYANJA: The biggest surprise was the fact that there were homeless people in the United States. People don't actually believe it back home, but there are actually homeless people in the United States. They actually were in the streets begging. When we were in Dartmouth, when they took us for the community service, which is the best thing I think that YALI does for the community service, there are actually people who starve. So it is amazing to see some of the problems that happen in Africa actually happen in the United States. And also there were jobless people, people who were looking for jobs. Now that bit me off. I thought everybody in the U.S. had a job.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now, one of the things that you may not know about me is that I actually lived in Norwich, Vermont —

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS:—which is where Dartmouth — it's across the river from where Dartmouth is.

MS. MAYANJA: We actually visited Vermont.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, and so Dartmouth University is a great school that's located in Hanover, New Hampshire. And as part of your Mandela Washington Fellow experience, you spent six weeks there

with 24 other young leaders.

MS. MAYANJA: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: And in 2002, I lived in Norwich, Vermont. And what brought me there was being in AmeriCorps VISTA. And AmeriCorps is a program that actually works on poverty in the United States. And so I spent my time working with young children who lived in government-funded housing projects in that area. And we actually would find students at Dartmouth and match them up as mentors to these young people so they had a good example of what to do. So I actually know the issue of poverty in the Dartmouth area firsthand and I can confirm that has been the case for quite a while.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah. It was amazing. I really loved what Dartmouth did for us, for all the charity work that we did there, visiting the different people who wouldn't survive in winter, visiting with people who didn't have access to food. It was quite amazing. Then we visited a city called Burlington, I think.

MR. PHILLIPS: I lived in Burlington for four years.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah, and there were so many homeless people on the streets. And you'd think those things wouldn't happen in that, like, powerful United States.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, why do you think it does?

MS. MAYANJA: I think it's the world. We are all the same people, and not everybody has the same status. Like, you think you live in — we—the world is like one bubble, one — actually one bubble. You'd think there is nobody who is higher, who is better. Every part has its own challenges and—yeah, actually, every part has its own challenges. So it's the way — how we overcome them, and in Uganda how we also try to make sure we overcome them. So you'd think there's no perfect place, there's no perfect bubble. It's how people actually work out their problems in whatever part of the world they are in.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that's right. That's — I couldn't agree with you more.

So let's use that as a jumping off point into your own life. And you talk about, it's not about the circumstances you're in but how you respond to them, how you overcome those challenges. And you've certainly become quite an accomplished entrepreneur and a leader, someone who's quite inspiring to Americans, to Ugandans, to girls, to —

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, wow.

MR. PHILLIPS:—to people trying to clean clothes, and all the way to the president of the United States. And we'll get to that in a second. But I imagine it wasn't always that glamorous and awesome.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about where you are coming from and how that's something that's motivated you.

MS. MAYANJA: I come from a family of 14 brothers and sisters. My dad had three wives. My mom was the second wife. And later, my dad died in my first year, first semester. And when he died — he was quite an amazing guy. I always was quite — quite wondered how he took us all through good schools, the 14 kids. And he actually had more kids he was looking after. So I was quite amazed at how that one man managed to do all that. Good kids and we still got fed. But when we lost him in — first I lost my real mom when I was in S3 and now I stayed with my amazing other mom, who is the heart and body and soul of everything that I breathe right now. But the biggest challenge was losing my dad in my first year, first semester at campus. He had just taken me to a very expensive university, that was Makerere Business School, and a very expensive hostel. And there he dies and the money just somehow disappeared. I really had to survive. And I noticed—I couldn't try and get back to my mom, tell her, "You know what"—because she also was depressed. How is she going to take care of all these other kids?

And I think that motivated me. But even before that, when I was in school, I was in an all-girls school. I lived with girls that came from, like, all different backgrounds, and I somehow would pull them towards me. I would always give a listening hand. I was on every cabinet of every club in school. And I even started, I remember, an AIDS club that later I called the Red Ribbon Club because when I called it the AIDS Club, nobody actually came to the first meeting. So I had to rebrand it. They kept on saying, since I called it the AIDS Club, it's only people with AIDS. Yet I just wanted to show these people because they're young, they can get AIDS. So when I rebranded it, so —

MR. PHILLIPS: That's a — let's just dive in on that for a second.

MS. MAYANJA: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that's a really important lesson is that sometimes the way you present something –

MS. MAYANJA: Exactly. Exactly.

MR. PHILLIPS:—is really, really important. So I think that's a good takeaway for people who want to — if you want to fight AIDS and you want to focus on that issue, maybe don't call your mission the AIDS Club.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Maybe think of a much more interesting way to approach that.

MS. MAYANJA: [LAUGHING] I remember sitting in the classroom for my first meeting after putting up flyers and everything, because after being on every cabinet of every club, I wanted something of my own that I've studied in school. And I was there alone, literally. Not even my best friend came. But later, when I talked to the [INAUDIBLE], it's like, maybe it's the name. And then I went to lead a survey and asked the students, "Why didn't you come to my meetings?" Like, "My dear, there's a rumor going around that you started the AIDS Club because maybe you have AIDS or you're actually looking out for AIDS people, people with HIV/AIDS, and it's going to make us so unfamous." So I went back and rebranded.

So I think my zeal to try and create different, to try and be different, was from school.

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that there's also another lesson in that, leaving aside the branding itself, it's something that the American technology sector is really focused on right now, but in general, which is this idea of really understanding your target audience, I mean, really actually understanding your mission, what you're trying to do, addressing a certain issue, but having the humility and the curiosity to actually talk to the people you're seeking to motivate and ask them what they think of it and then design something that meets their needs. And I think too often — and I say this as someone who's seen this a lot in the U.S. government and other places — we all sit around and try to cook up what we think is going to be great without talking to the people we're trying to reach in the first place. And that kind of feedback is really important at all steps of an organization, whether you're doing a high school club or you're trying to start a business or otherwise. So I think that's a really important lesson for people to take away.

MS. MAYANJA: Thank you. And I think also that bonded my relationship with the headmistress of my high school, and whatever program I bring to the school, I'm always welcomed with open arms, yeah, because I left a huge impact in the school. And later, as much as I also later a club still—also the A-level counselor. So I was literally always someone's, like, mother all over the school. And also the teachers themselves and even the staff — right now I go back and I start working from the gate.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MS. MAYANJA: Which is very cool. But all that, when I reached campus, really kind of faded away when I lost my dad. I thought when I would leave high school, I would still carry on what I was doing back in school, but I couldn't now. I moved into survival mode. I had to survive because now I had really nothing. I was glad that my uncle, like, my dad's brother took up to pay my tuition. But that's all he could do. I had to look for upkeep.

So, one of these days — I woke up one day and I was like, "Let me go and look for work." I walked into someone's office, my first boss ever, the first job I've ever looked for. I told him, "I can do anything that what your company is doing. Teach me and I will learn it in 30 minutes." And he was amazed this young girl who is in first year. She doesn't even have any papers and I'm telling him that. He's like, "First, have these flyers and go down there and try and get 10 clients. If you get 10 clients, actually more than 10, you have the job." And I got them in, I think, two hours. When I got them in two hours, he's like, "Sit down, let me teach you the software," and I learned it in 15 minutes. He was amazed. Then he made me the receptionist and the sales girl.

And from that day on, I kept on climbing ladders in his company and helping grow his company. But still when I was in that company, I wasn't satisfied. I would always volunteer, go volunteer in stuff that are organized by the U.S. Embassy. I co-founded an organization that now I'm a board member of, called Haven Anti-AIDS Foundation.

I was never satisfied when I was doing, like, business for my former boss because — later, in my third year, he promoted me to being marketing manager of his company, but even when he was — he wasn't doing any corporate social responsibility. It's me who introduced it there. To say it, I was never satisfied as much as now I was able to look after myself, give some more money to my mom so that my siblings can go to school. It was never really satisfying in my heart. I did a lot of back and

forth courses to improve myself in being a counselor, in being a trainer online.

So, in 2012, before I — after I graduated, I decided to quit my job. My mom was in shock. [LAUGHING] She told me, "Are you crazy?" And I'm like, "I'm not crazy." She told me, "But you are getting money; you can look after yourself. You don't need anyone." I'm like, "But I'm not happy." As much as I loved my work so much — because later, the guy who had set up the company, we had built it so much, he sold it for so much money, and my new bosses were also amazing, but I was never literally fully satisfied. And I remember, she almost — in Islam, we call it a dua. She almost did for me a dua to stay and to actually change my decision. And I told her what I was going to do. She told me, "But you're already giving back in your own way." I told her, "I'm not happy."

So I started Smart Girls Uganda after that. I noticed even when I was at my company, I always had girls around me, talking to girls. I liked — I felt bad that even the girls I was working with didn't have enough confidence to speak out, to chase for their dreams. I met so many brilliant girls who couldn't get out of the job market to start and create their own initiatives. So I was, like, let me start Smart Girls Uganda to empower girls in all aspects of life.

MR. PHILLIPS: You don't strike me as someone who has that problem yourself.

MS. MAYANJA: I had it when — somehow all the things I did, I was kind of hiding my self-confidence issues a bit, because being in a big family, you tend to try and close yourself. So I would use cool to try and build my own confidence. I didn't know that in the things that I was doing, I kind of was building my own confidence in a way, I think.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so what do you take away from your own style and your own background as you're trying to grow the capacity of these young girls to be as confident as you are? What's the quality you're trying to pass along to them?

MS. MAYANJA: The quality mostly is don't be afraid to accept that maybe you have loss of esteem and you can build it yourself. People say having self-confidence is — you're actually born with it. No, you can actually build it. And don't be afraid to fail, to get up. Don't be afraid to use the problems in your life to actually push you beyond your own capacity.

MR. PHILLIPS: Are there any tricks or any sort of very specific tips that you have for people who are struggling with their self-confidence? You know, look in the mirror and yell at yourself —

MS. MAYANJA: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS:—and say, "You're great!" or whatever? You know, what are some tips and tricks you tell people?

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, you are so cool. What I used to do at school, whenever I was walking to class, I'd say, "Hi Jamila. You are amazing. Oh my God!" [LAUGHING] I'd literally shout a hallelujah for myself when I was walking. And then I would tell people, "You know I'm amazing?" Like, I would literally stop people and, "By the way, seriously, I'm so cool. I can't even believe myself." So, I would assure myself by telling other people. And people believed it, like literally. And in the morning, whenever I would wake up, I don't wake up myself by grueling. I wake up to, "You're amazing Jamila." So I would give myself those things I felt other people did have.

I remember I've always been, what in our country would say small. I was always bigger than the people in my class. So I would call myself — I watched this movie. I called myself "fat beautiful Madame." So — and always called myself like smart. So whenever I was walking, I would always acknowledge myself, and whenever I was in the presence of other people, before they acknowledge me, I would really tell them, "I'm actually amazing. You really don't have to tell me, but thank you so much. I'm cool." So I think you just have to acclimate yourself before others do, so.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's really interesting. I mean, that's — yeah, I think that's really good advice for people to think about the fact that they're amazing, but also one level underneath that, what makes them amazing, you know, to drill in on, you know, your different skills and the things that really make you stand apart and be proactive and own that. That's yours.

MS. MAYANJA: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: It's something to be proud of, you know.

Okay, so you weren't satisfied and then you left and you started Smart Girls Uganda, really focused on how you can empower young girls and women.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Paint a picture for me about the world that a young girl finds herself in in Uganda. I've been there and I don't think the United States is perfect by any means, but I know that, in many ways, Uganda is more challenging for young girls and women.

MS. MAYANJA: For young girls, yeah. Why I did that mostly — when you're young, the girls, you are, practically in Uganda, you're brought up for marriage. Can you imagine most men in Uganda, fathers, educate their girls because they want to make them, like, have a good CV for marriage, that when a man comes to marry them off, they tell them, "You know, my daughter even has a degree, so that counts for big dowry." So there is this picture already painted for girls' future that — I actually tell fathers, "I don't know why you're educating your girl to actually go for marriage. Educate her to have her career and be successful."

And even when girls, yes, you know, when hormones kick in and maybe you get a baby very young, there you have no ticket to actually finish your career. You're tarnished in the environment. If you do not get a rich man to marry you, to actually get you your own business, you're actually a failure in the community. And then so many girls have what is shown on internet, what is shown on media. The girls are taken to be branded that that's all they are supposed to be is marriage material. And if you are marriage material later on and you also don't look after yourself, then the man is actually going to get another woman and add on to you. So the survival mode is be beautiful, get ready for marriage, stay in marriage, be respectful. And even some girls, when they get into marriage, they never — when they decide, "We are done and out," they never come out with anything. When they leave the family because they are put into marriage, it's like you no longer have access to your father's property, and then you become the property of the guy, and the guy himself doesn't sometimes in the end doesn't like you, gets you off, then gender-based violence. It's too much.

And then also for the rural girls, since — if they don't have enough money to take the girls in school, to take the whole family in school, it's the girl that will stay home. So the boys go to school because

they believe later, they will easily get jobs. Oh, it's so much. And even girls if they are educated and they fight the gender norms of not getting married, getting jobs is actually hard. They use their bodies to survive, to get jobs, to survive into the job industry. It takes a strong, smart girl to actually survive in Uganda.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, you paint a pretty dark picture there, but having been working in the space for a while and having grown up in Uganda, do you feel like things are getting better?

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And why? I mean, what are the — we talk a lot about the problems, but what are some of the solutions? What are some of the things that you think have made a very positive impact on this larger problem?

MS. MAYANJA: What is getting better now also are parents now. Most people who are parents now are educated, are now informed, and now they know better. The religious leaders also now know better, I would say. So many organizations and so many people like me who are fighting this issue. So there is this quite good awareness that is going around, I would say.

Let me say, actually the education, the fact that people — the media itself has penetrated even the rural areas. So the picture's been shown that this is bad and you need better. And now also the survival mode has kicked in. Most people — men who are getting married now realize it's not only them to work. It's okay to let your wife work. And they see they can live better that way. So people are being educated more and being informed more now, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Got it, okay. And so, your work on the Smart Girls Uganda really focused on this issue of women's empowerment, but then you moved beyond simply this company focus on building self-esteem into a company focused on cleaning clothes.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So how did you find yourself in the laundry business?

MS. MAYANJA: So, get this. While I was doing my work — because with Smart Girls, I give them life skills training and business and entrepreneurship training, right? When I was doing that business and entrepreneurship training, I noticed that the ladies and the women were not actually implementing what I was doing. But I was kind of trying to ignore it. Later in the process, I got married, my amazing, handsome husband. And when I got married, I had to do chores, and the chores meant I had to wash clothes, and I really hate washing clothes, oh my God. I told my husband, if he has to divorce me, I think that's one thing he would divorce me for. And then he's like, "No, there's a solution. Let's get a lady to wash your clothes and it's okay. We'll pay her some little money." And that's what I did. I got a lady in the neighborhood and she did my washing, hand-washing, because, you know, dry cleaners are quite expensive.

So, three months down the road, the lady comes back and tells me, "Oh, Madame, by the way, I think I'm going to get you someone else to wash your clothes because with the money that you've been paying me, I've started a market stall." I was like, "What? Seriously?" [LAUGHING] She's like, "Yeah. Yeah, I've saved up and I've actually started that." And that's when I got the "aha" moment."

I was like, “Do you know what?” I told her, “Do you know what, we can start this into a business. Let me test it because I have gotten so many ladies telling me you’re training us but we don’t have the capital to actually start.” And that’s — and I’ve been being messed up with—I had [INAUDIBLE] and were trained to figure out how the youth and the women can start businesses at a very low capital. And it was also working out.

So I sat down with this lady, got 10,000 shillings. That’s like three dollars, and I gave her 6,000 to go and look for, like, five more ladies. And then I used the 4,000 for air time to call a few of my friends to see if they needed the service, like, if they hated washing like how I did. And I was happy to get, like, — it was mostly men who were full bachelors, were like, “Oh my God, what have you been waiting for? I’ve been dying here actually, have two week’s clothes.” And then that’s when I started J Mobile Laundry Service. And the ladies started slowly, slowly doing door-to-door laundry service for the clients I would get. And on the weekends, I would do entrepreneurial and employable skills training for them, tell them how to save the money that we’re getting from the business to later start their own initiatives. So it kind of became like a franchise for Smart Girls. I’m still doing the training and still getting them business and I was also kind of getting some little bit backside money for myself. Yeah. And then YALI happened in the process. [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: And so with the YALI that you came over here. You spent time at Dartmouth.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: You developed skills and connections I would imagine, some of the relationships you —

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS:—you have made have been really useful. Can you talk about some of the people that you met through that experience who were really inspiring to you?

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, wow, I think YALI has been quite a life-changing experience for me. First of all, I meant, when we went to Dartmouth, they taught us this amazing thing that I’m still using up until now called Design Thinking and the Business Compass Model. That was, I think, the best capacity-building knowledge that I’ve gotten so far, because I’m now using it into the business and also teaching the ladies on how to use it and also with Rotary Uganda, they have adopted it in the program that we are doing.

But the best thing is YALI itself — after the people that I met there, the knowledge, the advice, the peer collaborators and how to build — do more training and capacity-building for the ladies. But the most amazing thing that I will never forget is my Obama moment, President Obama shout-out.

When I went back home — okay, I became famous because of President Obama. Yeah?

MR. PHILLIPS: So tell us that story. What’s — I’m sure people want to know your Obama moment. So, paint the picture for us.

MS. MAYANJA: No, the picture is we were seated — because, you know, we have a presidential summit at the end of the fellowship and we get to meet President Obama. I went. I had just come in. I thought I had the worst seat ever. It was behind to the side. And then while I was in the hall, I got a

call from the White House and they asked me, “So, how do you pronounce your name?” I’m like, “Jamila Mayanja.” She kept on saying, “Okay, I think they may speak about you, but please don’t tweet about it.” I’m like, “What?” So the whole time, when everything was happening, it was really in my head, “Speak about me? What are these guys talking about?”

So he comes in. Everybody’s shouting and he starts his — oh, God, he’s amazing — starts his amazing speech. And then he starts mentioning about the few fellows that are doing amazing work—first mentioned some gentleman from Zambia, mentioned a lady Kadijah. And next, he’s like, “And we have Jamila Mayanja.” Oh my God, I jumped up. I almost shouted, “Hallelujah! Mashallah! What?” But I just shut up — and modeling—and he kept on saying, “Oh, she’s modeling.” And it was quite funny. He mentioned the work that I’m doing. And yeah, the moment ended, but it was so cool. So, [LAUGHING] yeah, that was the picture.

When I went home, oh my God, everybody wanted to shake my hand. Everybody wanted a hug. And I could give them the hugs, but while marketing my business, “By the way, I’m doing this.” [LAUGHING] So everybody who would call me up and tell me, “Come and tell us about your Obama experience,” after the Obama experience, I would tell them, “By the way, do you need washing clothes services? I do this and this.”

So, that experience marketed my business quite big. I got featured in BBC, media all over the country. But it came with also bad things a bit. I wasn’t prepared for that quick growth of the business. Now I had so much business, my ladies were doing double work. So they were falling sick with their hands. And right now, I’m working with other fellows to try and rescale and rebrand, I would say. I’m working on building the first ever laundromat in the country, and it’s going to run in containers, run on solar, use recyclable water. And next to it, I would have the training center, so my ladies won’t have so much — how do you call it, manual labor? More of doing a service of maybe pick and delivery and maybe doing the laundry when people drop it off and have more time for the trainings, more time for their families, more time to plan for their businesses. And actually, some people who would come around to do their own laundry would have a chance to visit our training center. You never know, they might support someone. So, I’m consulting a Fellow who was in my — the best thing I also got from YALI was the networks. So I’m consulting a Fellow who was in our year, 2015, Daisy Karimi — she’s an engineer for solar—advised on how I could work out with the solar. And also consulting another Fellow in Mauritius [INAUDIBLE] — he’s an architect — to help me design out. Then I’m working with another Fellow who’s a 2016. He’s also an engineer, who will be also talking with also Daisy to make sure the solar panels are actually working. And I’m also working with another Fellow from 2016, Joseph Ddungu, who is very good with paperwork, to actually write out my paperwork and also working with the YALI Uganda Fellowship to help me rally and make sure the whole thing works out. So everything is quite YALI branded.

MR. PHILLIPS: It’s a YALI project.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, I have to say, it’s kind of nice to hear a story that starts with you walking into school, saying, “Jamila’s awesome,” to Barack Obama saying, “Jamila’s awesome.” And I think it’s a nice capstone.

Well, thank you very much for coming. It's been a pleasure to have you here. Jamila Mayanja, who has done incredible work in Uganda, both focused on empowering women, but also moving beyond simply the idea of building confidence, but also identifying the means to grow a business.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC BEGINS]

And we wish you the best of luck with your work moving forward, and really appreciate the time you gave us today.

MS. MAYANJA: Thank you for having me. It was quite amazing.

MR. PHILLIPS: Good. Thank you.

Thank you everyone for tuning in to another YALI Voices Podcast. And thanks, Jamila, for a great conversation. You can reach Jamila on Facebook at Jamila Mayanja. She's also on Twitter at Jamwiltshire. That's Jamila. You can find her on Facebook and Twitter.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders of the YALI Voices Podcast. Join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov, and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government. Thanks everybody.

YALI Voices: Education shouldn't only be for those who can afford it. [audio]

(Courtesy of Manasseh Gowk)

Editor's Note: Since the recording of this podcast, interviewee Emmanuel Osei changed his name to Manasseh Gowk. He is referred to as Emmanuel Osei during the podcast and Manasseh Gowk in the blog.

He was born in war-torn Liberia and had to flee with his mother and siblings to Ghana, where they struggled to make ends meet. Yet YALI Network member Manasseh Gowk, formerly Emmanuel Osei, counts himself lucky. He was able to earn the scholarship he needed to go to school. Now, mindful of others who can't afford an education, Osei is giving back.

"I think there are some people who are just like me," he told the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast. "I've seen people that I grew up with, you know, who weren't able to further their education because some of their parents couldn't afford education."

Using his network of connections, Gowk has been raising funds for students facing financial constraints and helping them apply for scholarships.

“I look at their self-development, what they’ve done to develop themselves beyond classroom tuition. I also look out for students who are ready to help others given the chance,” he said.

But helping others get an education isn’t his only passion. Listen to the whole podcast to find out how he is leading by example when it comes to helping Ghana’s environment.

Don’t have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

“YALI Voices Podcast: Emmanuel Osei”

[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can ♪
♪ Sure we can ♪
♪ Change the world ♪

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome Young African Leaders! This is the YALI Voices podcast – a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network.

My name is Macon Phillips, and I’m really glad you joined us today. Don’t forget to subscribe to this podcast. Just visit YALI.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI.

I had the opportunity recently to sit down and have a conversation with Emmanuel Osei, a young African leader who was born in Liberia during the civil war and ultimately moved to Ghana with his family.

Emmanuel has been doing work in the education field, assisting students and finding ways to fund their education and giving them the opportunity to study abroad. On top of helping students reach their full potential, Emmanuel also has an interest in Ghana’s environment; in particular, its sanitation issues. So let’s jump right into my interview with Emmanuel Osei.

It’s great to have you here, Emmanuel. Thanks for joining us.

EMMANUEL OSEI: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now, Emmanuel, you’re based here in Ghana – you’re from Liberia originally – you were born there?

MR. OSEI: I was born there.

MR. PHILLIPS: Because your father was a U.N. peacekeeper?

MR. OSEI: Yeah. That's –

MR. PHILLIPS: Is that right?

MR. OSEI: Yeah –

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, and now you're here in Ghana and doing a lot of work in the education space.

MR. OSEI: Definitely.

MR. PHILLIPS: So let's – let's start just by talking about your background. I know there is some – a lot of challenges involved in where you're coming from, but I also wanna hear about some of the things that helped inform you as a leader in what you're doing now. So paint us a picture of what life was like in Liberia when you were coming, coming up.

MR. OSEI: Well, I've been in Ghana since 1990. I was actually born in September – on September 26, 1990. And exactly one week time my mother had to come all the way down here to Ghana because of the Liberian war. So I've never returned back to Liberia ever since, and I've had my education here in Ghana, and so devoting myself to education here in Ghana means a lot to me. I went to primary school, to junior high school under scholarship. My mother couldn't afford and because I was very brilliant I managed to earn a scholarship. So I know what it means to, you know, have the need – the educational need and not have the money to fund yourself. So growing up I've seen people that I grew up with, you know, who weren't able to further their education because some of their parents couldn't afford education. And at high school level my uncle took care of me. He actually took care of my high school education, and when I did very well I enrolled into the University of Ghana where he continued to fund me until I graduated from college and I'm now working. So I would say that I'm a Ghanaian and my mom and dad – my mom and dad are Ghanaians, and since 1990 I've not been back to Liberia, though my dad have stayed there until two years ago when he returned and, unfortunately, passed away.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK. So when you think about where you're coming from, it's all Ghana.

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that experience it sounds like was not always easy, but you seemed to excel in school. And, I wonder, a lot of people who are good in school maybe take on a job in the private sector and start a business; some maybe go into art and other things, but it sounds like you have really focused on this nonprofit education space. Why is that? Do you know what – when did the light bulb go off that this is an area you wanted to focus on?

MR. OSEI: I think it came as me identifying with somebody's predicaments, somebody I just met and I felt I could be of help to her because she couldn't enroll into the university because the mom didn't have money. The following year that when she got a chance to be in school, she actually enrolled as a fee-paying student which was, you know, outrageously expensive. And at some point she had to defer – she had to drop out of school. And I know this girl is a very brilliant girl and so I had to go meet people that I knew and people that I knew could be of help to her and eventually raised funds for her, put her back in school. So when I realized that I could capitalize on my links and connections to help people, I decided to stay in that particular field.

MR. PHILLIPS: So where did you take that? You started with one – one person you knew –

MR. OSEI: One person I knew –

MR. PHILLIPS: – and decided to try to grow. So what did you do from there?

MR. OSEI: After that – so what I do is my sister is a teacher in Takoradi, so I arranged with her and asked her to, you know, recommend students that are very good students – potentials who are financially constrained and then I would arrange with people here in Accra, we raise money, and then we send it to cater for those people. So as it stands now I've been able to raise money for two additional people, in addition to the lady I provided support to. She's reading pharmacy in the University of Ghana. She's in the fourth year.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great.

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so now when you're working day-to-day here in Ghana, tell us some of the things you're working on other than just that type of program to help students.

MR. OSEI: OK. So I'm working now as a senior recruitment officer for universities in the U.K. So I go to international schools, I go to universities – private universities and public universities – and I interact with students and I talk to them about study-abroad opportunities for these students and scholarship opportunities. Those who are from very rich backgrounds gets to pay full and then they go to study, but those that need support we provide, you know, scholarships, skills that are available. We help them write their essays – scholarship essays – and then they get some of the scholarships that are available.

MR. PHILLIPS: What do you look for in students when you're talking to them?

MR. OSEI: When I'm talking to students I look for students not – I'm a very, you know, brilliant student, but I believe that there are some people who are the wrong place and so, you know, I went to university, I wanted to do linguistics and English, but I did very well in high school. My uncle said, "No," he's funding me, so I had to do banking and finance. So I think there are some people who are just like me. When I was in my second year, I proved to my uncle that I wanted to do something communication – something English, something linguistics – so I won my first international poetry award in Italy and so I felt so proud of myself that even though I didn't get to do it, I'm still excelling in that aspect of my life.

So when I see people I don't want to jump to the conclusion that once you're not, you know, we are not doing well academically you don't deserve the chance to do other things that you have special interests in. So when I'm looking – when I'm talking to students, I look at their self-development, what they've done to develop themselves beyond classroom tuition. I also look out for students who are ready to help others given the chance. So these are one of the – these are the two main things that I look out for apart from academic excellence.

MR. PHILLIPS: So here in Ghana, as you're doing this work, what are some of the other issues that you're starting to pay attention to as we look forward into the future for both Ghana, but also just the region? What are some of the issues that you think are most interesting?

MR. OSEI: One of the issues has to do with the environment – sanitation. It's one of the things that I really have on my heart. You know, the waste management system here is very very poor – very appalling. The reason I'm saying this is that none of us, we are not ready to change our mindsets on how we pay attention to our environment. And, personally, I take my time to do proper, you know, disposal of refuse. So when I eat I don't just put the – drop the banana peel in a bin; I keep it in my bag, when I go home – I live in a very green area – I live on the University of Ghana campus – we have a very – a lot of green areas – and then I dump in there, and then dump the rubbish inside a bin because I think that if I'm doing this and 10 more people gets to do that, another 10 more people gets to do that, doubling up 100 more people. When we continue to do that the problem that we have – here in Accra when it rains just a day people are crying because we are going to have serious flood – flooding. And last year, June 3rd, we had a very big disaster here in Ghana and it was all over the world. It's because we don't pay attention to our environment. Even those who are educated, even the elites have a problem with this, you know, this refuse disposal, and it's very, very painful. Each time I walk around, even on University of Ghana campus, I want to try to correct people. They think that, you know, you know it all, and they either insult you or they don't even give you any response and they walk away. So one of the key things that I would wish that things would turn around has to do with waste management and the way we treat our environment is very, very poor over here in Ghana.

MR. PHILLIPS: So this is an issue you're gonna be focusing on –

MR. OSEI: Definitely.

MR. PHILLIPS: I know that there's a lot of people in the YALI Network and in general who are already doing a lot of work in this area. So if you're looking for Emmanuel, look for Emmanuel Osei here in Ghana, and he's working on a number of things. His background is in education, but he's starting to think a lot about waste management and its impact on the environment.

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: I wanna end by asking you just a few questions that we've been asking everyone that we interview. The first would be something that surprises people about you. You're a pretty low-key guy. You're pretty – pretty focused it seems like, so what's something about you we may not realize?

MR. OSEI: I'm very compassionate.

MR. PHILLIPS: You're very compassionate. What does that mean?

MR. OSEI: I'm ready to share with people not based on the fact that they don't have, but based on the fact that they need it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. OK.

Next question: Are you – would you consider yourself a morning person or someone who's more of a night owl – late night person?

MR. OSEI: What I will say – if I go to you, if I'm nocturnal? Do you mean –

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you like to wake up early or do you stay up late?

MR. OSEI: I wake up very early, like this morning. I do that a lot. I sleep late and wake up early.

MR. PHILLIPS: You sleep late and wake up early?

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: How do you do that?

MR. OSEI: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you mean you stay up late and you wake up early?

MR. OSEI: I don't plan to do that, but I end up doing that. So it has become a part of me.

MR. PHILLIPS: [LAUGHING]

Well, Emmanuel Osei, I really appreciate the time. Thanks everyone from the YALI Network for tuning in. We'll have another interview for you soon, but until then have a great day. And, Emmanuel, best of luck to you here in Ghana on your important work.

MR. OSEI: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. It's a pleasure.

MR. PHILLIPS: You bet.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Thank you everyone for tuning in to another YALI Voices podcast, and huge thanks to Emmanuel Osei for taking the time to talk with me.

The way he uses his own connections to broaden the education of others is why we're truly happy to have people like him in the YALI Network.

If you'd like to reach out to him, you can find him on Facebook or Twitter under Emmanuel Osei.

All right, I'm gonna spell that for you: E-M-M-A-N-U-E-L-O-S-E-I. Emmanuel Osei. Look him up on Facebook or Twitter.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on YALI Voices podcast and join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is E Go Happen by Grace Jerry and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct.

The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

This is Macon Phillips signing off. Thank you everyone.

[MUSIC PLAYING}

###

YALI Voices: Education changed his life. Now he's giving back. [audio]

Fombah Kanneh poses with some of the children he is helping with his startup Gift 2 Change. (Courtesy of Fombah Kanneh)

Fombah Kanneh grew up in a makeshift house in the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, during the country's civil war. As in many other cities, slum life in Monrovia is notoriously hard — plagued by drugs, poverty, hunger and peer pressure to engage in destructive behavior.

Speaking with the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast, Kanneh said that, due to his circumstances, he faced "one solid wall" barring a successful future. But thanks to his mother's sacrifices and determination, he also had "one narrow, slim opportunity" to improve his chances: education.

Kanneh, a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow, founded the startup Gift 2 Change as a way to give back to his community by supporting single mothers and children who are facing the same challenges he did.

"It's my responsibility to get somebody from somewhere, especially in the rural areas, in a slum community, to this stage, that one day too, they can have the opportunity to explain their success story," he said.

"They are not just kids today. But they are the future leaders of tomorrow," he said.
Gift 2 Change combines environmental sustainability with community building and education projects. Kanneh mobilizes young people from the streets to help him collect scrap materials, compost, bottles and other waste to sell to a friend who runs a recycling center. He uses the money to provide clothing, books, educational materials and training to Liberia's most marginalized children.

Listen to the full podcast to learn how Kanneh found the inspiration to dedicate himself to his community, and like former South African President Nelson Mandela, has come to believe that education "is the most powerful weapon we can use to transform the world."

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)
"YALI Voices Podcast: Fombah Kanneh"

[MUSIC: GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to

share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm so glad you've joined us today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast, and visit yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI.

When speaking about having achieved success, people often claim that they started from the bottom. My guest for the edition of YALI Voices, Fombah Kanneh, really did. He grew up in the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, during the civil war. Fombah and his mother were forced to live day to day, often not knowing where they'd sleep, or what they'd eat.

It would have been easy for Fombah to fall in with the wrong crowd. But early on his mother stressed the value of an education. Fombah embraced education as the narrow opportunity he had to escape poverty and violence. After graduating university, he decided he would dedicate his life to helping lift children and single mothers out of poverty.

Now let's jump right into my interview with Fombah Kanneh.

[MUSIC: GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

Fombah Kanneh, it's great to have you here, and I hope you have had a nice trip from Liberia, and a productive time here. I'm looking forward to talking to you today.

MR. KANNEH: It's an honor to be on YALI Network. Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: Absolutely. So we like to, in these conversations, just kind of get a sense of where you're coming from, and what you're working on these days, and look ahead to some of the challenges that are facing us. So let's start by kind of asking the simple question. When you meet somebody for the first time, and they say, hey it's great to meet you, what do you do? How do you answer that question?

MR. KANNEH: I said, thank you, it's an honor to meet you. My name is Fombah Lasana Kanneh. I'm from Liberia. I basically aim to children-related issues, supporting kids in rural Liberia, and in urban slum communities as well, and kids that can't afford. Because once upon a time, I was just like those kids in rural Liberia, especially on the streets of Monrovia. So I have to give back to them. Just summarizing what I do.

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that's an experience that not a lot of people can understand, what it's like to be a kid on the streets in Liberia. So paint a picture of what life was like for you when you were really young.

MR. KANNEH: Well, terrible. Again, born in poverty as a child was not a decision I made, but to get out of poverty as an adult was a decision I consciously made. Because life, it's not about where you're coming from, it's about where you are going. Yes, I was born in poverty. Yes, my dad passed on. So I grew up with a single mother.

And in the slums of Monrovia, things are really hard, tough. So to some extent, my mom searched up coal or firewood to send me to school during the crisis, the Liberian civil crisis, at the time. So I have one solid wall, and one narrow, slim opportunity.

This solid wall — poverty, corruption, growing up in a violent community — indeed, was really

painful. But the slimmest of opportunities I had, at the time, was to go to school. That was the narrow slims of opportunity. It was not deep, it was narrow.

Because you know the time, you want to go to school, your mom is sending you to school, when you're coming back to a community, you have peer pressure. Your friends you play with, today, they're not in school. They want you to just join them. So growing up in the slums of Monrovia was really painful, terrible.

Sometimes you don't even have a square meal. And if you have a square meal, you never know where next you will sleep. If you know where next you'll sleep, you don't know what next activities you guys will do. There was nothing planned. Because your shadow, your clothing, was just at a time where it could come off anytime, because of the crisis.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're living day to day. You're living in poverty. There's a lot of children that grow up in that situation. I'm sure you have friends and people you know from when you were younger. What was different about you? Why do you think you made some of the right choices, and took advantage of that slim opportunity that education offered?

MR. KANNEH: Thanks to my mother, and thanks to all single mothers out there, you know. Mom encouraged me a lot to go to school. At the time, I told her that it was not really a good stuff to go to school. Like people would say, why do you want to force your son to learn Western education, for example. And unfortunately, my mom is not an educated lady. She doesn't know how to read and write.
But she had a sense that she must send us to school. So I was forced to go to school, to some extent. Until I realized the importance of education, when I graduated from high school, and I started to support myself in college.

But what I do, with the question of what I do, especially giving back to kids in slum communities in rural Liberia. Because a few years ago, I was in that same situation. So I deem it necessary now to give back. I'm talking to you, Macon and the rest, because somebody somewhere, along with my mom, gave me the light, which is education.

So that's why I'm here. So indeed now, it's my responsibility to get somebody from somewhere, especially in the rural areas, in a slum community, to this stage, that one day too, they can have the opportunity to explain their success story.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that's one of the reasons, I'm sure, why you put together Gift 2 Change.

MR. KANNEH: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Why don't you tell us a little about that? That's the project you're working on right now. And I know that was heavily influenced by your respect for your mother, and sort of came from that. So tell us a little about what that project's all about.

MR. KANNEH: What Gift 2 Change is social entrepreneur startup for sustainability [INAUDIBLE]. Now, thanks to the YALI Network, online, I met this guy. He was a 2014 Fellow, and he also encouraged me a lot to participate in the Mandela Washington Fellowship, through his mentorship, through the YALI online network, I got close to him.

Coming to my project Gift 2 Change — so say he ran a big company, a recycling company. Not really a huge one. So I help collect bags with the young people, from the streets of Monrovia, to give to his company, called Green Cities Incorporated, where he manufactures these into large production. For me, I'm just mobilizing young people, getting my team on the streets, and sent it to him.

So what I would get from this selling of those scrap materials — blocks today, bottles, compost materials — it was to sustain my vision of giving back to impoverished kids, with that campaign called Leave No Child Behind. And I learned that campaign, in many ways, through my fellowship. There's a campaign called Leave No Child Behind. So I said, OK, at least we can take this back home. Especially to my village, my country, then we can run it through Africa.

So that to sustain our vision of giving by whatever I sell to him, sustain myself, and give back.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now in addition to that, you're also teaching classes some. I know that you have used the YALILearns platform, and the classes from that. Can you talk a little about your experience using the resources on that, and from the standpoint of other people who might be listening right now, who might be considering that, how did you find it useful?

MR. KANNEH: Well, it is a library. It is a huge resource center. It's not just the video that you watch for entertainment. It's a video that you watch to inspire you. What are you into? Civil society, for example. What if you're into business and entrepreneurship, or civil leadership? It helps to generate the kind of person you want to see.

So yes, I've benefited from it. So others want to be like me, a role model, right? Or have opportunity at the same time. So what I do with the materials I got through YALI online, through the internet, or through flat disks — so I share it through to PowerPoint presentations.

Soon, for example, we have free and popular speaking. And the lady will come on display, the YALILearns materials from the video presentation, they all watch it, university students. And people from local communities who watch those videos. If they can't understand the American way of speaking, maybe they see it as serious or standard English, they find it difficult.

We have to come — as someone who has participated in a YALI program — and break it down to their level, to the simplest form, so at least communication can flow. So that it can get a message, and be the leader that we all can be, in Africa, in the world at large.

MR. PHILLIPS: So now you're in Liberia, you've got these initiatives, you're teaching these classes. Tell me what the future looks like for you. What are some of the big projects that you're planning to take on?

MR. KANNEH: The future looks bright. But it's only for prepared people. Getting a lot of their materials from YALI online, been a Mandela Washington Fellow, going to the U.S., coming back. It's easy. You can set up bridges virtually. But it's not a point to celebrate here, until you can liberate somebody through education. Like Mandela said, education is the most powerful weapon we can use to transform the world. And as someone that benefited from education, and is still benefiting, I think it is a responsibility, and a driven passion to help kids in rural and slum communities.

In terms of how the future looks bright, we can do it together, by sharing and helping others. It's

easier for us to sit in this room and criticize. It's easier for us to lament the years I was born in poverty. So what? Yes, I don't have resources. And so what? Who cares?

I'm thinking right, I've been taking one step. If you can't say, 'I am,' no one will say you are. So you have to, especially young people across the world, in Africa, if you can't be the change that you want to see, and rise up to the occasion, then no one will be. But if you just sit there and don't do nothing to build your future, you become an instrument of violence.

Especially as to what is going on in West Africa. Extremism is all over.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, let me ask you a question on that. Because I couldn't agree with you more. But I think you would agree that breaking through, sometimes, to people, particularly kids, can be really difficult. In particular, when they're in poverty, or they're not in a good education system. And they kind of turn it off. And you have to break through to them.

For all the people listening today that are focused on similar issues, that are focused on children, that are trying to break through, what have you learned, both from your own experience growing up in poverty, and now doing work focused on children? What are some pieces of advice you could give to those who are trying to pierce through that, and help people understand that they need to stop making excuses and take that initiative?

MR. KANNEH: Well, growing up as a kid in a slum community, and those experiences that I had, personally, I think if we all can just take one single action, it starts in your home. It starts with your own family. Then you can take it out. You have to sacrifice, yes. The challenges ahead of sharing those training materials with kids are very sharp and difficult. I can tell you that it is bread-and-butter stuff.

Well, again, if you don't do it, who will do it? If you can't rise up to change that mention, no one will do it. We all seem to be busy because we want to make profit. Yes, it's good. But the initiative of giving back to kids, you learn to be more tolerant, you learn to be more patient-mannered. You try to understand that you're not doing it because this is the kids of Liberia, but you're doing it for kids. They are the future.

Not just Liberia, but Africa. Not just Africa, but the world. So in order to fill the gap, especially in Africa, we have to educate the kids. You run a program on YALI online called Africa for All. That's a great initiative. And where people are signing, or encouraging people to stand up for women's rights, no violence against women, now having a large campaign around electorate issues. Those are great initiatives.

But if I can recommend an appeal, which of course you already started. We can say Africa for Kids. Stand up for kids. Those campaigns, you know — you may just sit in D.C. and just send messages, you're all OK. But you don't know the impact that you made, except you meet the Fellows interacting with them.

YALI Go Green. We all want to go green, now. We all want to wear green shirts, and sensitize others. Well, if we can all just rise up, Africa stand up for kids. Stand up for kids against violence. Stand up for kids with education. Social injustices, kids suffer from social injustices.

We have a lot of juveniles in prison across Africa. Maybe they can't afford, besides education, dozens of children I earn go to school every day, but go to school hungry. So if we can just start running those campaigns, and we don't have to sit for mark on the rest of the stuff for YALI online to do it — but if you're listening to me, wherever you find yourself, we can create those online platforms, especially through social media, and sell the idea that we need to stand up for kids.
They are not just kids today. But they are the future leaders of tomorrow.

MR. PHILLIPS: Totally agree with you, and I know we've done some work already on climate change, done some work already on women's empowerment. I really appreciate your point that people shouldn't wait around for people in D.C. to come up with this stuff. You're already working on this. So tell me a little bit, something, about you that might surprise most people.

MR. KANNEH: Well, like African youths, we love soccer. And if I'm really down, well, I gain inspiration from soccer. If I can gain inspiration from soccer, and I just look and sit, and see people that don't have anything I have, and they still appreciate themselves. So what does that mean? I have something. So those are the two areas I really get inspiration from.

If you want to give up, and you say, OK, I'm this, I'm that, just look at someone around. They don't have eyes to see. They don't even have feet to walk. What's about you? You have five senses. Beautiful ideas. But just wake up and take something positive.

Like many youths, what stops us from achieving our full potential is the fear factor. When I started, especially when I came out of university with this campaign, Leave No Child Behind, people would say, you're not going to make it. You'll fail. Come on, we'll have a job here for you. You can do this one five hours a day, earn this.

I said no, this is my dream. You don't believe in my dream, then compared to you, I believe in my dream. If my dream of helping one kid to be successful, I can do it.

And lastly, through the YALI online, I'm sharing this vision to a Fellow from Tanzania. So Leave No Child Behind, now, is not just in Liberia, now, but it's crossing borders. From Tanzania, now Fellows from Sierra Leone want to repeat the ideas, because they've been inspired.

Even Alieu Jallow, from The Gambia, have all been inspired. If Fombah can do it, we all can do it.

MR. PHILLIPS: That sounds like the kind of thing you want spreading. You know, sounds like a great thing to grow.

MR. KANNEH: If it can grow, then we all would make an impact.

MR. PHILLIPS: So my next question, this is just a little bit more specific, maybe a personal question. Which is would you consider yourself a morning person or someone who does better late at night?

MR. KANNEH: I think in the morning.

MR. PHILLIPS: You wake up early and get started.

MR. KANNEH: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you have any routines or anything that you feel like you do every day or every

week that helps you be more organized, and focused?

MR. KANNEH: I'm more focused on building my mind, then focus on taking exercise and building my own body. We need to balance work, with fun, with exercises. But if we balance our mental capacity, which of course is the mindset. The mind, for me, I believe, is the most powerful weapon.

So when I wake up in the morning, for me, before going to bed, the first thing I do is to have an agenda for the next day. If I wake up, where do I start my day from the start? My agenda is already set. When I wake up, I'm strictly into it. Start work at like 5 o'clock in the morning, check a few emails, and follow my daily activities.

From 5 in the morning till 12 are my productive hours, because anything after 12 it would just be a bonus. That's exactly what I focus on.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I'm hearing that from a lot of people I talk to. It's just get it done in the morning, that's when you're most productive.

OK a final thing is you've been answering a lot of questions. I appreciate it, but if you could ask a question of President Obama, what would your question be?

MR. KANNEH: See if I had the opportunity, I'd say, Mr. President, thousands of kids in Africa don't have the opportunity to go to school. What you can do, in your own weak way, as president of the free world, as a fighter, to help kids in Africa? Kids in the world? Not just limited to Africa. Giving an education.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, great. Well, I really appreciate it. We've had a great conversation with Fombah, and wish you the best of luck back in Liberia.

What a great conversation that was with Fombah. It's hard not to be inspired by his story and his commitment to help others facing similar situations. He figured out, early on, that education unlocks the key to a better life. Thank you, Fombah, for taking the time to chat with us.

If you'd like to get in contact with Fombah, you can find him and his organization on Facebook under Gift 2 Change. That's gift, the number two, and change. Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast.

Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger. Our theme music is "E Go Happen," by Grace Jerry, produced by the presidential precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. Government. Thanks for listening, everyone.

YALI Voices: A natural storyteller airs the

facts [audio]

Essan Emile Ako (Kendra Helmer/USAID)

“I was really talkative when I was a child. And I like events,” Essan Emile Ako tells the State Department’s Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast. That helps to explain the passion he has for his work as managing director of Radio Arc-en-ciel, an urban community radio station in Côte d’Ivoire.

He says one of his biggest influences is his grandfather, whose storytelling prowess transcended an inability to read and write due to a life spent in poverty.

“I never realized that maybe communication was something that was directly related to the tales and stories that the old man was telling me. But when you give it a thought, you see that it is a straight line going from the curiosity to learn, to discover, tales, stories that are really interesting, and then going to radio where you have to, yes, write about fact,” Ako said.

Ako’s radio station is especially valuable to his community during Côte d’Ivoire’s elections, which have sometimes been marked by violence. As a nonpartisan media source, “our role is to make sure that population get the right information before making an informed choice,” he said.

Listen to the whole podcast to find out more, including the challenges of sustaining community radio and Ako’s efforts to expand public access to it.

Don’t have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)
“YALI Voices Podcast: Essan Emile Ako”

[MUSIC - GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative network. My name’s Macon Phillips, and I’m so glad you have joined us today.
Before we get started, don’t forget to subscribe to the podcast and visit yali.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. My conversation today is with Essan Emile Ako. Essan is an inspiring young leader and popular radio personality in Côte d’Ivoire. He credits his career path to his grandfather, an avid storyteller, who helped raise and heavily influenced him. Essan is especially passionate about promoting free and fair elections in Côte d’Ivoire. He’s also working hard to expand public access to radio programming over the internet.
Now let’s jump right into my interview with Essan Emile Ako.
So welcome, Ako, it’s great to have you here.

ESSAN AKO: Thank you so much, Macon. It’s really great to meet you for the first time. I’ve been receiving mail from you, from the YALI Network, for the great work you have been doing. We are really grateful, and I’m happy to meet you and to take part in this podcast.

MR. PHILLIPS: Great. Well, it's been a lot of fun. And I apologize for all the emails. We just get really excited, you know.

MR. AKO: Yeah, I know.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're in radio, and now you're trying to steer your work in radio to support peaceful elections. But let me start a little bit earlier. What was your first memories, your first experience with radio?

MR. AKO: Well, thank you. My very first experience in radio was in May 2008. By then, I was a student of second year at the University of Côte d'Ivoire. And I was just in the barber shop when I heard an advertising on the radio, on local radio, of our district that they are recruiting new program hosts. I had never been into a studio, a radio studio, before. But I just decided to apply because when I was in secondary school, I used to just act like an MC of some ceremonies.
And so I decided to apply, and then I went, I asked for information, what should I bring? They say, you should bring a show proposal. They asked me to present my first program as a test. So I read the story of Nelson Mandela for about five minutes in English. And then some listeners called to say that's really great, we need an English program on that radio station. So you should take this guy. And that's how I started as a talk show host.
MR. PHILLIPS: Now if you had gone back to yourself and secondary school, or even younger, and said, guess what you're going to be doing in a few years, would you have been surprised?

MR. AKO: Well, not really. Not really, because I was really talkative when I was a child. And I like events. Appearing in events and always trying to have my say, trying to contribute. And this was a really part of me. But actually, I really wanted to become a pharmacist. That after I chose that, I don't know exactly why, but maybe I was going to do work in radio, in communication is a really great and fun so far.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're always talkative, always storytelling. I know you mentioned that your grandfather was a big influence on you in that way. Can you describe that a little bit?

MR. AKO: Exactly. As it goes back to my way early childhood, the '90s. I was born in 1987, and then in 1992 I started going to school. Then I discovered my grandfather, whom I took my father, because I never knew that I had another father somewhere, because my father had divorced with my mother. And then this old man would — could not even walk even, because he was too old, really nurtured me with his own experience, always telling me his stories and tales from our cultural background. And from his experience, what he had done in Côte d'Ivoire, even in the sub-region, in West Africa.
Although he was illiterate, he had traveled, and at that time they used to walk wherever they wanted to go. So they told me to the whole of these stories, and I was so close to him that I couldn't even relate to my age-mates. And then after this, is something like a fish in water, I was to become the future, and what I'm doing now.

MR. PHILLIPS: So walk me through that. Your grandfather, and stories, and that experience really led you to what you're doing now. What do you see in what you're doing now that's connected with, sort of, the values he communicated to you?

MR. AKO: I never realized that maybe communication was something that was directly related to the tales and stories that the old man was telling me. But when you give it a thought, you see that it is a

straight line going from the curiosity to learn, to discover, tales, stories that are really interesting, and then going to radio where you have to, yes, write about fact. There are sometimes, also, you have to be imaginative. To imagine things, and then tell their story. So I think that's a whole lot of these have really contributed to what I'm doing now.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so let's talk a little bit more about what you're doing now. So you're not only in radio. You also manage radio. You're in the business of radio, trying to think about how radio can not only be interesting, but can actually be sustainable.
So talk to me a little bit about the challenges of being involved in radio right now in Côte d'Ivoire.

MR. AKO: Well, thank you. Radio is such a great, amazing, interesting business for one to be in. Unfortunately, for community radio stations, the low-end policies around that are not really clear, so there are people in the radio stations that don't have a status. And most of the workers in the community radio stations are volunteers. Volunteers, they are not paid, they just work there for their passion, and then they are obliged to look for money somewhere else.
So this is one of the biggest challenges. There is no clear policy. There are some requirements. For example, a radio station cannot be involved in partisan politics. It is true this avoids using politicians using radio stations to manipulate the people, and to create wars in crises. It's good.
But at the same time, this prevents radio stations from having income and resources, and this prevents our actions on the ground. On the other side, also, we are not allowed to do commercials as a commercial radio stations. So our commercial actions are really limited to about 20 percent of our whole budget.
So if you cannot run adverts to a certain level, you cannot deal with politicians, then our sources of income are really limited. And we have to rely on donors, let's say, NGOs, local NGOs, international NGOs. But the whole of these structures, institutions, have their own agendas, have their own programs. So if what you're doing does not fall into what they want to achieve, or if what they want to achieve does not have a communication component, then radio stations have to just struggle to just live.

But we could do more if the policy was very clear, the staff in the radio station had a clear status, and had a career — where you can have careers in community radio stations.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you describe a challenge. And so now tell me, moving forward, how you're addressing that. What are you planning to do about that?

MR. AKO: Well, in addressing these challenges, you have to be a really creative and imaginative. We live in a community of 1.5 million people. And these area is said to be the poorest urban area in Côte d'Ivoire. So we are confronted by many challenges. In trying to address some of these issues, we may create opportunities.
For example, during the election in Côte d'Ivoire in 2015, the radio stations decided to promote free and fair elections. This was our goal that help when we go into the street, go into communities, and organize with communities so that we come together around the table to discuss the benefits of free and fair elections.
We did not have funds. We wrote some grant proposals, and fortunately for us, we met the USAID office for transition initiatives. They had a program called CT2, Côte d'Ivoire Transition Initiative, so they decided to just support us. And they gave us a grant of about $48,000 that helped us to promote free and fair elections for eight months.

And also, we tried to create programs that will attract local businesses or sponsors that would help us. So we have our ways to think about the strategies, and to refine our strategies.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so now you're trying to move forward, and use these community radio stations even more to promote free and peaceful elections. Can you walk us through what the future looks like? What are some of the exciting things that you're looking forward to?

MR. AKO: Well, in the coming months, there will be two very important elections in Côte d'Ivoire. The legislative, where we are going to elect our members of the Parliament. And then there will be a referendum about the amendment of our constitution. So these are really great moments.
And if you look at the past story of Côte d'Ivoire, you will see that election time have been times of struggle, times of fighting. So we are going, also, to promote free and fair elections at this local level, and also inform the population about the upcoming referendum. With that being, we don't know exactly what is going to be modified in the constitution. But as a community, as a community radio station, or a community organization, our role is to make sure that population get the right information before making an informed choice.

Then in trying to move forward, there are many challenges, as I mentioned earlier. So in trying to solve some of these challenges, then we could come up with opportunities, grant opportunities, to deal with some more on these problems.

MR. PHILLIPS: And then anytime we talk about the future, and moving forward, inevitably, we talk about the impact of technology, social media. So as someone who's in a medium that historically been pretty basic, you've got the antennas, and radio receivers, and all that, I'm sure that you're also exploring the digital side of your work. Can you talk a little about the intersection of technology and the current business you're doing with community radio?

MR. AKO: Well, yeah. The development of technology, in the beginning, some of our elders, in radio and television, saw it as a competition between internet, and the radio, and television. But our generation, we are fortunate enough to learn that the internet is not coming to compete against to the radios, that we can use internet to further reach a larger audience.

So we, in the recent past, we built a website, and then we tried to broadcast, live-streaming online, just for us to have a broader audience. Because one thing about community radio stations in Côte d'Ivoire is that their reach is limited. There is a regulation that we should not go beyond, sometimes, 10-kilometer radius, or 60-kilometer radius, like in our case.

But with the internet, there's no limit. You can have it everywhere. So it's really fantastic and wonderful. Once we finished our website, the problem we were confronted with was, in fact, two problems. The cost of internet, and how quick internet is. So these two problems prevented ourselves from being really streaming online. So after that we took our website down.

But our project is not done. We are learning ways to continue that. But we have a presence on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and we even intend to be build a mobile app, application, for young people to be able to receive our radio station and some of the recorded programs on the mobile phones.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK. So we'll wrap it up with three questions we like to ask everyone just to kind of

see what the different answers. So you're someone who's been in radio for a while, focused on elections, really got it all put together. What's something about you that would surprise people?

MR. AKO: That's a question, but let me just try to say that I come from a very poor family. Poor, but have always said you don't need to be a billionaire to be happy. Although I was poor, my grandfather was poor, my family was better. I was not unhappy when I was a child, because of the love that I was in need, I got it from my grandfather and from my mother, also.

And so when I started going to school, I was fortunate to have my stepfather taking up all the charges for my education. And then when I went to a secondary school myself, I started having some problems. So while I was in secondary school, we tried to go to work in farms just to have yams, some cassava, some bananas. And sometimes some money for us to continue our education.

And this continued to when I entered university, where I used to sell booklets. I was out of the classrooms while my mates were in the classroom. Following courses, I was outside, and I was selling English-speaking booklets. So I used to do sell these, and by the end of the day, I could have up to $10. That's enough for me for the week.

And then for the courses, once my mates come from the classroom, I used the courses, I made a photocopy, and I'd read through. And once I have a topic, I go online, on the internet, I bring some courses about this course that have been done because I did not have explanation of a teacher. And at the end of the day, I succeeded to pass all my credits up to the master.

MR. PHILLIPS: Man, that's amazing. So you would be outside selling these little books for next to nothing, make $10 worth of money out of it —

MR. AKO: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Find your friends. Photocopy their notes. Study that. Go online. Watch the courses on the topic. And then still pass the test.

MR. AKO: Exactly, exactly. Yes, this is what I did. And I did it for almost five years, when I was at university.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sounds to me like whatever you put your mind to, you're going to figure out. It seems that it's pretty impressive. So let me ask another question, then.

MR. AKO: Ok.

MR. PHILLIPS: Are you a morning person, or are you a night owl?

MR. AKO: Yes, I mostly work better in the night. So I can stay up in the night, up to maybe 3 o'clock, 3 AM, working. But in the morning, it's really difficult for me to wake up and work. So yes, when I wake up, I have to do some sport, wash, then go to where I'm going. But I really stay late in the night.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, that's great. My final question is if you could ask Barack Obama a question, what would your question for him be.

MR. AKO: You know when you look up the story of President Obama, some to 20 years ago, he went

to Kenya where he was met only by his sister at the airport. And we saw the pictures where his grandmother was living, and we even saw pictures of him carrying a bag in all of this.
And then, 20 years later, the same person goes back to the same country, but this time it's not only his sister who came to meet him, but the head of state, the whole people, and even the whole Africa, came to meet him. Then my question is, what are the three most important principles that guided him from that time where his sister only met him, up to this time, where he cannot go anywhere unnoticed. This is my question to President Obama.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's a great question. And within that question, I think you make some really important points. And certainly one of them is that he has received quite a lot of support from people across Africa, including a lot of young leaders. And I think that's part of what makes YALI so special, is it's certainly a relationship between President Obama, but the United States generally, and young leaders across Africa, like you.
And I really appreciate you making time to share your story with us today.

MR. AKO: Thank you so much.

MR. PHILLIPS: I want to thank everyone from YALI, YALI Network, for tuning in today. And we will be back with another interview soon. Thanks, everyone. Have a great day.

Essan's an incredible example of the power of perseverance. There's no doubt he's put the work in to achieve his goals and succeed. Thank you to Essan for sharing your story with us. If you'd like to get in touch with him, you can find them on Facebook under Essan Emile Ako. That's E-S-S-A-N E-M-I-L-E A-K-O.
He's also on Twitter. His handle there is @seniorako. Get ready for my French pronunciation. His radio station is Radio Arc-en-ciel, and can be found on Facebook, as well. That's A-R-C E-N C-I-E-L.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov, and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. Government. Thanks, everyone.

YALI Voices : After being compared to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, what's your next career move? [audio]

(Courtesy of Raindolf Owusu)

In 2012, a 22-year-old Ghanaian computer science student named Raindolf Owusu introduced African internet users to the Anansi Browser. It is considered Africa's first web browser and was designed to help users with unreliable internet connections stay connected as well as use games and a web camera that can operate offline.

For his creation, he has been dubbed "the Mark Zuckerberg of Accra" by Forbes Africa magazine. But as he tells the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast, as successful and as celebrated as the browser has been been, he lives in a country where many people can't use it because they aren't connected to the internet.

"Building a big web browser … will give you accolades and everything else, but that's something my mother cannot use or my grandmother in the village cannot use," he said.

As founder and CEO of the software company Oasis WebSoft, Owusu wants to create products that would be more relevant to his community. For example, in Ghana, like other African countries, mobile phones are relatively cheap and nearly everyone has one.

Where is he taking his talent now and what are his future plans as a young leader? Listen to the audio above to find out.

Don't have access to Sound Cloud? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

"YALI Voices Podcast: Raindolf Owusu"
[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can. Sure we can. ♪
♪ Change the World. ♪

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome Young African Leaders. This is the YALI Voices Podcast – a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm really glad you've joined us today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast. Just visit YALI.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI.

I recently had the chance to sit down with Raindolf Owusu. As the creator of Africa's first web browser, he's already an accomplished software developer and entrepreneur in Ghana. He's the founder and CEO of Oasis WebSoft, a software company, partially focused on creating mobile phone applications to help diagnose and address healthcare issues for Africans.

Raindolf had a lot of really valuable insight on the future of technology in Africa and what it takes to be a modern leader. It's really no wonder he's been called the "Mark Zuckerberg of Africa." So I hope you enjoy this interview as much as I did. We're going to cut now to my conversation with Raindolf Owusu.

Raindolf, it's great to have you here. Thanks for joining us.

RAINDOLF OWUSU: Thank you so much, and great to have you for this interview. Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: I know you've had a pretty great career so far. It's still early on in your career.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: But looking forward to hearing a little bit about that, certainly your perspective on technology in Africa –

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: – and where you think things are going. But let's try to take it back a little bit. You've made your career in large part on the internet –

MR. OWUSU: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: – and sort of doing all of that. What was the first time you ever touched a computer?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, so my dad got us a computer when I was about 10 years old. He bought it for my older siblings. So we, the younger ones, weren't allowed to touch it. So I have five other siblings. So late at night when they sleep, I just jump on the computer and see what's happening. And one night, I ended up deleting everything on the computer because I needed some space. And I got the beating of my life because at first they didn't know I touched the computer, and now they got to know I deleted everything. So that was pretty much my experience with computers.

MR. PHILLIPS: [LAUGHING] That's not a really auspicious beginning, man.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah. But that got me interested in computers because I realized it was such a big device then, somewhere in 2001 or 2002, and, you know, it did so many different things. I could play games with the computer. I could use Microsoft Word and things like that. And, over time, it gave me a lot to think about.

MR. PHILLIPS: So when you were in secondary school, when you look back on yourself as a student, were you always sort of tracking towards the computer nerd programmer, spending all your free time on that, or was it something that you were aware of but kind of came back to as you developed your own career?

MR. OWUSU: No, it has always been there. I had interest in computers. I remember when I was about 13-14. I used to be called "the computer man" in the neighborhood because I knew so much about computers, and most of them were self-taught because I'm always on the internet and finding new things. So during secondary school, I was a visual arts student instead of business. I had a lot of interest in business. So I wasn't so much interested in schoolwork. So I spent most of my time at the internet café.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, there's, though, a certain school of thought – I think Steve Jobs from Apple would be probably the most well-known example of this – that the sort of intersection of liberal arts or visual arts and engineering is exactly where you want to be if you are creating consumer products. [CROSSTALK] So maybe as you think about your own career, what, if any, was the influence from that time spent studying visual arts?

MR. OWUSU: Oh, I – even now, I'm happy I did visual arts because now I'm building products – I am building products that I want people to interact with, easy to use. It should be visually appealing because I get to work with colors, I get to work with building software, mobile applications. And all these things have to do with design. So, yeah. They always intersect. Visual arts is a pretty much [INAUDIBLE] technology.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, a lot of people that I talk to have, you know, this interest in entrepreneurship, and they have this interest in starting a business and that sort of thing. And you're someone who's done that.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Successfully, right?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So let's start with where you just talked about, your time in school, your visual arts school, and you're not really going to class as much –

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: – because you're not as engaged.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did you go from there to actually taking the plunge to start a business? Walk us through the steps it takes to go from being a student, maybe not even a super motivated student, to an entrepreneur.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, it's – I think I had [INAUDIBLE] when I got to the university because I did computer science at Methodist University. So I got to the university and my first day, I enjoyed programming. I was programming and it was very fun. But later on, I realized the schoolwork was becoming so much. And there was a lot happening outside Ghana. So, just like, you hear of a 16-year-old kid who built an app and it's being purchased by Yahoo for $13 million. And this is a simple app that I could design.

So, the first thing I did was to start – at first it wasn't a company in my head. I was just building a product that I would let people utilize. So I was building products, and later on, over time, I started reading more about this whole technology, and I realized it's actually a business. You have to read more than just technology. You have to actually set up a company. You have to work with people.

So it didn't just happen overnight. I failed a lot actually. My first product became well-known, but to me became a failure. That's called Anansi Web Browser. That is to date being claimed as Africa's first web browser. So I built a web browser because I wanted to show the world Africa could build technology, because anybody who thinks of Africa thinks of an agricultural nation where we are producing oil or we are producing minerals and things like that. But I pretty much wanted to show the world technology is also [CROSSTALK].

MR. PHILLIPS: You wanted to show the world and then you went up and built Africa's first web browser. Why do you think it's a failure?

MR. OWUSU: Pretty much because I didn't customize it for it to be useful in my environment. And that was one learning step I took after building that. So after building the web browser, I decided to build things that would work really well in Africa. So, to me personally, but I believe it gave a lot of people inspiration that if Raindolf also could build a web browser. So personally, I think that is my

personal feeling, but overall, looking at me building a web browser in 2011, it was such a big accomplishment, so.

MR. PHILLIPS: So then where did that take you? What did you learn from that in terms of your next step?

MR. OWUSU: So my next step was to look into the market, realize there was a high penetration rate of mobile devices. So everybody had a smartphone because android phones are very cheap. So they had smartphones but they didn't really know it was a smartphone. So I'm like, "Hey, how can we leverage on that and built people the products they want to have?" So we built a product like Bisa, where – Bisa, it means "ask" in Twi. Twi is our local dialect in Ghana. And what we are doing is we are connecting people from home to doctors. So when you have your mobile up and you are a young person and you are seeing some symptoms around your private parts – because we live in a very conservative society, people are scared to go to doctors. So we are giving you a chance to use your phone to take a screenshot and anonymously send it to a doctor and he will get back to you with feedback and let you know you need to see a doctor as soon as possible because this looks like that or you have to do this in order to get rid of that. So we were connecting the public to doctors. And this is very relevant to the community than building a big web browser where it will give you accolade and everything else, but that's something my mother cannot use or my grandmother in the village cannot use.

MR. PHILLIPS: It's so interesting to hear about that use case, because one of the things that I run into when we are talking about the digital aspect of YALI, the online aspect of YALI, is this sense of the digital divide.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: The fact that there isn't internet everywhere here, and in fact, there's not internet in a lot of places at all, and on top of that, there is sort of a digital illiteracy.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: But it would seem to me that this product that you are rolling out, which is trying to extend health care to at-risk, disconnected regions would almost by definition be targeted at people who –

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: – aren't familiar with the internet, aren't necessarily connected with the internet.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, how do you square that circle? How do you reconcile the fact that you're in a region where connectivity is tough, and sometimes using computers or smartphones or connected devices can be a little bit difficult with this need to make sure that these services are utilized?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, so I always attribute the kind of work I do to the fact that I'm actually on ground zero. I'm where everything is happening. So when I'm rolling out a technology like Bisa, I have to think about every part of Ghana. I don't just need to think about Accra. Accra is just a small piece of

the whole Ghana. So there's somebody who is in Sirigu in maybe the northern region where the only time he or she gets close to technology is the radio or maybe a Nokia [INAUDIBLE] that does not have app features or anything. So when we are building a product, we build high-end for people like myself, who have been to school, literate people. And we build something using like an IVR, an Interactive Voice Response, where – with any mobile device. It doesn't have to be smart. You just dial a short code and someone will talk to you in a local language, a response system.

So, we are building technology for high-end people, and we build a stripped-down version for people without access to that IT infrastructure. And we get to do that because here on the ground, we know how things like this work in different parts of the country.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so, as someone who's studying this closely and has a business that really depends on it, give me the forecast to where you think Ghana is going in terms of technology, and to the extent you can, Africa generally. As we think about our own efforts, our nonprofits we want to start, our businesses we want to start, how is technology changing Africa?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, that's a good question. I think technology at first was something most people were scared about, if you read the history of technology in Africa, where people had big computers in their offices and they never used it. But now we've seen a change, and mobile phones have led that revolution. At one point, we had so many mobile phones in Africa than even telephone devices in the U.S. or something, right? And that stems to how mobile phones revolutionized this bit.

And one thing people are getting to understand in all sectors in business in maybe Ghana is technology is a backbone. Healthcare needs technology. Entertainment needs technology – even education. So I think in the next five years, you'd see distance learning or e-learning taking shape in schools. And once that this becomes a norm, it will be something everybody would have to accept in any industry, whether agriculture, because now we have small farmers that are using SMSs to receive weather forecasts. So technology is actually taking shape step by step, but then it will take a while and a lot of education.

So in Ghana perspective, I think the next five years would see a lot of innovations. Some of us are spearheading it in healthcare. I want to see other people doing it in agriculture, people doing it in education, and so on and so forth.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's interesting though because I haven't heard someone answer it with the sort of first point, and I think I agree, perhaps the most fundamental point being its impact on education.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Because, you know, all these other things build on having a literate, knowledgeable workforce. When we talk about civic engagement, people have to understand the world. When we talk about new economies, people have to have these skills. And when you think about the current state of education systems in a lot of countries in Africa, it's not good, the idea that you could actually bring in these online courses and bring in tech-driven curricula could have a profound impact on where things are heading. So it's a really interesting point you make.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So where are you heading? What's your next business? You know, you've already started some successful businesses, and it seems like the latest one is doing really great work around healthcare.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: What do you daydream about? What do you want to work on moving forward?

MR. OWUSU: Oh, so I think I've fallen in love with the healthcare sector, and – because besides getting very popular, it's becoming very impactful in Ghana. I'm looking at ways to enter into other markets, other West African markets like Côte d'Ivoire, where Bisa will not only support Ghanaian languages, but will also support French and maybe expand to other African countries.

So the next focus – and a few days ago, we had a small forum with my team where we are discussing how we can move the technology into other areas of the whole healthcare system, you know, because recordkeeping is very important. But we don't take it seriously in this part of the world, where you go to a hospital and you are given your folder to take home. That is very terrible; you can just lose the folder. You know, we need like a digital cloud system that can house all your information, so no matter who the doctor is, once you come to his room, he looks at your ID, he can just pull up your healthcare information. And it will help for them to continuously understand your ailment or anything else.

MR. PHILLIPS: A few other questions I have for you. You mentioned earlier that you were at a forum for your team.

MR. OWUSU: Yep.

MR. PHILLIPS: And I'm curious. As someone who's gone from being, it sounds like, the younger kid in the family, right?

MR. OWUSU: Yep. [LAUGHING] Yeah, I'm the youngest male, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Of how many?

MR. OWUSU: I have two other brothers and three other sisters.

MR. PHILLIPS: Alright, three other sisters?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh my goodness. You're well-loved growing up, I'm sure, right?

MR. OWUSU: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: So, you're one of the young kids in the family, and now you're running an organization.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: What have you learned along the way about management and about leadership? I mean, what do you think has made you effective at leading other people?

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, I think it's because I don't see myself as a leader in the team, but as a team player. And I'm going to explain that. Because I'm a trained software engineer. If I come up with a project and we are working on it, I actually need a software development team. So I get to write the code with them. So when you are working with a team and they know they are part of the process, they don't really feel left out.

So that has attributed to the success of our project, you know, because I don't become your typical leader where I tell you to do this or do that, but I actually work with you, so if you have any problem, you can easily walk up to – and even my office is an open office, so you can easily walk up to my table and say, "Hey, I'm having problems with this code," or "I'm trying to market this to this client and I'm not getting it." So I think being a team player is very important. And the fact that I continuously mentor them. Any time they have any challenge, they easily walk up to me and I'm open to listening and offer my advice. And I even tell them to explore, you know, other avenues of solving problems. You know, it's not just your work at the office, but then, hey, we live in a very diverse society. So if there are problems you see, you can bring it on board and let's see how best we can all work together. So I think being a team player has actually contributed to my success as a leader.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Are there things you do every day or routines you do every week that you feel like have made you a more effective leader or more effective person in terms of your goals?

MR. OWUSU: I think reading. I read 30 minutes every day, whether it is news articles or a book. And I like to read things outside what I'm doing. So you won't find me reading a book about technology. You'd find me reading a book about a politician or a religion or something.

MR. PHILLIPS: What's on your Kindle or on your bookshelf these days? What would you recommend to people?

MR. OWUSU: I think How to Influence People. It's an interesting book. And I read a lot of autobiographies. So these days I'm reading about Kenneth Kaunda. He used to be the President of [INAUDIBLE] – Zambia. I read a lot of autobiographies.

MR. PHILLIPS: And what would you say – if you had to sum up your reading so far on him – has been the sort of takeaway?

MR. OWUSU: I think he had to make hard choices and he was – you know, religion in Africa is very big, so he was juggling between how to become a Christian and how to make hard choices when it came to dealing with rebels and things like that. Should he arm the soldiers to go and fight the rebels? Or he should be relaxed for the rebels to take over certain regions? So, yeah, I think – [LAUGHING].

MR. PHILLIPS: Hard choices.

MR. OWUSU: Yeah, hard choices. And being a leader is all about making hard choices, so you should always be ready for that.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, the last one is more turning the tables because we've been asking you a lot of questions. If you could ask Barack Obama a question, what would you want to know?

MR. OWUSU: Ahh [LAUGHING] If Obama is sitting – President Barack Obama is sitting here, I want to know what's next after the Presidency and if he would be more involved in issues in Africa. So I would want to know what his plan for Africa would be after 2016.

MR. PHILLIPS: I don't know the answer to that, but my hunch is it will involve something having to do with Africa. I was speaking earlier about this. I got a different question and what is very clear to me is that Africa is very much in the President's heart and so are young leaders.

So, for everyone out there on the YALI Network listening to this, I think there's – it's hard to imagine a future where Barack Obama is not somehow involved with these issues and on this continent. So, the future is bright, not least of which because of the young leaders who are tuning in right now. And we want to thank all of you for joining us today on the YALI Podcast. Raindolf, I've really enjoyed our conversation.

MR. OWUSU: Thank you, Macon.

MR. PHILLIPS: Thanks for making time.

MR. OWUSU: You're welcome.

MR. PHILLIPS: Have a great day.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MR. PHILLIPS: What's really great about Raindolf is how committed he is to mentoring. He sees the value in sharing ideas and moving everyone forward. I also love how he practices the idea of failing forward. It's the notion that even when things don't work out for you, you can still learn from the experience and immediately apply those lessons to your next project.

So I want to thank Raindolf for sitting down and sharing his story with us. If you'd like to get more info about Raindolf, check out OasisWebSoft.com where you can connect with him and get more information on his projects.

Thanks so much for listening and make sure to subscribe so you don't miss any of the upcoming interviews with other young African leaders. Join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, produced by the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

Thanks everyone.

YALI Voices: My voice for Burkina Faso

Martine Nikiema (Courtesy photo)

My name is Martine Nikiema. I am a citizen of Burkina Faso, which means “the land of upright people.” It is a landlocked country sandwiched between Ghana, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Togo, Niger, and Benin and is at the heart of the West African savannah.

The purpose of this article is to amplify the voices of my fellow countrymen and women who are fighting for democracy and the rule of law. Six months ago, I was privileged to be one of the Mandela Washington Fellows and to participate in the 2015 Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) representing my country. It was a real honor for me to be selected from a pool of over 30,000 continental applicants to travel to the United States and participate with other young leaders in YALI.

In the weeks following the announcement of the Mandela Washington Fellows, I wondered why I had been selected, since I never saw myself as a charismatic leader.

Last June I left my country to begin a new chapter in my life that would include big challenges, each of which I was determined to see as an opportunity. On the plane, I looked in tears at my country and our people. The biggest question that sprang to my mind was how and when my country would see the needed social changes it craves: food for children, better education and justice for all, human rights, and gender equality. I am optimistic because my people are hardworking and brave, and because I believe in a better future. Every day my people do their best to to improve their living conditions. But it takes good leadership to make these changes happen. How can they reach these objectives if there are not good leaders to guide them?

I spent my first six weeks at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, learning business and leadership skills. That period made me look back on my past life and what I have done in my community, fighting for better education by helping children in rural areas get light through solar energy. After six weeks, I finally understood that leadership does not necessarily mean taking huge action, but rather taking any action that changes the lives of people for the better. And good leadership is a determining factor in the process. A leader is a team player and a good listener who gives people a chance to speak and hears their voices. He or she is able to inspire others and guide them to continue their journey with more hope for success. I started at that moment to believe in myself, but I also realized that I still have a long journey to be an effective leader. My main objectives became:

- Empowering hopeless youth who no longer believe in justice.
- Inspiring females to continue their education in order be a change-maker in their community.
- Getting donations and support to provide solar lamps to children in remote areas.

Upon completing my course at Dartmouth, I travelled to Baltimore to participate in an internship with Bithgroup Technologies, a renewable-energy developer. During my six- week internship, I continued working on my objectives. I was in a hurry to return home and share my experience with my family, friends, and community, and to start my dream of being a good leader.

Citizens of Burkina Faso protest against the recent coup in Ouagadougou. (© AP Images)

On September 16, 2015, less than a month before elections, a military coup changed the situation in my country. The president, the prime minister, and two other ministers were arrested by the presidential guard (RSP). The citizens of Burkina Faso protested to denounce this anti-democratic and terrorist act — fighting by using their voices for peace, human rights, and democracy.

Their relentless resistance against the oppressor finally won them the much-needed victory they longed for for over half a century. Despite the death of 15 people and the wounding of 200 more, this victory is a watershed in the democratic process of my country. It will help heal many years of military brutality and impunity, as well as gross abuses of human rights. My country has regained its sovereignty and dignity. Today I am proud to be a citizen of Burkina Faso. I am even tempted to call it — like the United States — "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

This victory is obviously not to the advantage of some regional powers and leaders who continue to torture their people. The military in most African countries do not serve their people but are at the service of the elites. The army in Burkina Faso gave an example of patriotism when they fought back to protect their citizens against the presidential guards. They will go down in history as paragons of an authentic national army on the African soil.

I am grateful for the opportunity I was given by the U.S. government to learn skills of leadership and be part of the solution for the transformation of African societies and particularly of my home and beloved country, Burkina Faso. I know it is incumbent upon us, the next generation, to be an example for all countries facing challenges. Our future depends on us, we the people; our destiny is in our hands, and we cannot allow anyone to destroy it.

I can use my voice to educate, inform, and defend our interests and to show the world the true meaning of democracy. Each population has the right to choose their leaders through legitimate elections. I raise my voice to say to nations that believe in democracy and the rights of individuals and countries to determine their own destiny: This is the time to take action. Time for more freedom, more democracy, and more justice. We, the people of Burkina Faso, are ready to face anything to reach our goals. I raise my voice to ask you to stand with us for justice.

The views and opinions expressed here belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the YALI Network or the U.S. government.

#YALICHAT: Engaging Youth in the Democratic Process [video]

Voting is one of the greatest civic responsibilities of a citizen. However, many youth across Africa are unaware of the steps one needs to take to participate in the electoral process in their countries. Join two Mandela Washington Fellows, Sobel Ngom from Senegal and Chedi Ngulu from Tanzania, to learn about their initiatives to educate youth about their voting rights and the registration process. They will discuss how they initiated their projects, mobilized volunteers and other organizations to help them, and how they used traditional and social media to spread the word.

For more about the program, read "To Get Change, Vote"

About the Program

Sobel Aziz Alfred Marie Ngom, Senegal
Sobel Ngom is the Founder and Executive Director of Social Change Factory, a citizen leadership center created in whose mission is to inform youth of their civil, economic and social responsibilities. In 2012, he designed and implemented the Voix Des jeunes (Voices of Youth), a program that provide key information regarding the voting registration and process during the 2012 elections in Senegal.

Chedi Festo Ngulu, Tanzania
Chedi Ngulu is the founder of MegaMark Communications and has led several major commercial and social marketing campaigns for companies, government, and international organizations. He plans to implement #AHADI, a voter education and registration campaign to increase youth engagement in the upcoming 2015 general elections in Tanzania.

Senegalese Group Teaches How to Vote, Have a Choice

Join Sobel on the video #YALICHAT Engaging Youth in the Democratic Process on Wednesday, February 25th at 1400 UTC.

As Dakar resident Sobel Ngom completed his high school final exams, he began to think that if more people knew how to vote, they could change their country's future.

A visit to a family friend in a village shed further insight on that thought. The visit "changed my life," Ngom says. The villagers he met "didn't care about elections. They didn't know the candidates. The democratic system was not a part of their lives."

Later, as a communications major at SupDeCo University in Dakar, Ngom set his sights on teaching people all over Senegal how to vote. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2012, just as Senegal's presidential election was approaching. He wanted people to make conscious, informed decisions about who their next political leader would be.

He recruited a couple of university friends to join him. With about $3,000 in contributions from

friends and family, the three-member team developed a voter education campaign that combined social media, print, television and in-person outreach strategies designed to reach as many people as possible. Through word-of-mouth, within weeks the team had grown to 25 volunteers.

Achieving Success

Ngom, a member of the YALI Network and 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, described how his group in three months created greater awareness among the targeted audience about the voting process.

The team organized public presentations to help villagers understand the importance of voting. The presentations included a basic handout using simple language to describe the basics of democracy and voter registration.

The team worked one-on-one with older community members – most of whom had no official record of their birth or residency – to help them get proper documentation from their municipal governments allowing their registration as voters. Older people were "very supportive" of what the team was doing, Ngom says.

To reach youth, the team employed social media platforms like Facebook and You Tube, and events like concerts to encourage voter registration and democratic participation. It put an online version of the handout on its Facebook page called Voix Des Jeunes (Voices of Youth).

Ngom's colleagues even created an online practice ballot to familiarize future voters with the process of casting a vote. Because their parents had never voted, youth, who are the majority of Internet users, did not have a family tradition of going to the polls.

"We chose not to say to people 'guys, you have to vote,'" Ngom emphasizes. Instead, "we wanted to help them understand the process." Team members stayed away from promoting or opposing any candidate.

Along the way, Ngom says he sought advice from an uncle and other family members. His father, a diplomat, and sister, a former United Nations development worker, helped him find out how to apply for additional funding.

Parallel to this voter education work, Ngom heads the social media department for a digital company. He also has started several projects including a summer school program for rural youth, aiming to reduce the gap in national exam results between rural and urban students. He recently started a leadership center called "Social Change Factory" to inform youth in French-speaking Africa of their civic, economic and social responsibilities.